

Chapter 9

More than just Logging In: A Case Study of Learner Engagement and Immersion in Cross-Curricular Events in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This case study chronicles co-curricular activities held in the virtual world Second Life. The event activities included standard content delivery vehicles and those involving movement and presence. Several international content experts were featured and allowed students to meet and discuss ideas on a common ground with these experts. When developing these events, the researchers wondered, could an immersive learning environment be provide a deeper level of engagement? Was it possible to have students do more than just logging in? During the events, the students discovered a whole new way of learning. Chief among their discoveries was the realization that in these virtual world educational events, students, scholars, and faculty can all be mentors as well as learners. In virtual worlds, the expert-on-a-dais model of teaching is rapidly replaced by a matrix of discussion, collaboration, and movement that quickly generates a pool of ideas and knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

The group had just finished listening to the panel and were about to fly to the next event. All of a sudden, the participants froze in place and everything faded to grey. The rolling restart had begun. Luckily, there had been a ten-minute warning and the participants had been provided with evacuation and re-entry instructions. As the team waited in the Real World, they thought about the day so far. Lecturers vanished in mid-presentation. Monsters flew through the air. Participants' heads exploded, and a cataclysmic event forced total evacuation. This was not your typical classroom. That is, unless your classroom is in a virtual world.

Virtual worlds are cutting-edge pedagogical tools when used well. In the 3-D environment, educators can immerse students in learning by engaging them in exciting ways that are still quite new to their experience. The potential of learning in virtual worlds reaches far beyond asking students to create avatars that simply sit in replications of their on-campus real-life experiences. Handled creatively, virtual worlds enable students to become agents of their own learning through active contributions to the learning environment.

This case study chronicles events held on the Front Range Island in Second Life, *The Fine ARRRRRT of Being a Pirate* and *Met@Morph: The Second Life Web Comics Comic-Con*. These events were used to enhance the content of Humanities, Philosophy, Women's Studies, and Accounting classes at Front Range Community College. The event activities included orientation to SecondLife, tours, raiding and looting, lectures, roundtables, contests, and even evacuation during an unplanned rolling restart. Community college students attended presentations, discussed academic papers and concerns, and socialized with scholars from five countries.

During these events, the researchers wondered, could Second Life be used to actively engage online students in learning? Could an immersive learning

environment be created that is different than the real world campus environment? Could faculty, instructional designers, and students create an immersive learning environment? Could a virtual world provide the level of engagement called for by Prensky (2005) and others? Was it possible to have students do more than just logging in?

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2008, a team of faculty and instructional designers at Front Range Community College hosted events in Second Life designed to expose to students to a wealth of international and offbeat scholarship while teaching them the skills they would need to complete assigned learning activities in Second Life in the spring of 2009. The first event, called *The Fine ARRRRRT of Being a Pirate*, was scheduled for Saturday, September 20, 2008 (a tie-in to International Talk like a Pirate Day), and attracted roughly 25 participants.

The site was the Front Range Island in Second Life, and the event provided a combination of play-acting and scholarly presentations as seen in Figure 1.

Students learned to navigate and communicate in Second Life by learning how to speak and gesture as pirates. A Renaissance-era Venetian banker dueled with a rogue swordswoman on and above a pirate ship, and all who were assembled attended lectures on an island floating in shark-infested waters. Chris Luchs, accounting faculty, asked the assembly, "Who were pirates?" "Scoundrels!" "Rogues!" "Thieves!" said the assembly. "Did Pirates have accounting?" asked Luchs. "No!" replied the crowd. "Wrong!" said Luchs, appearing as the 16th-century Venetian banker. Luchs proceeded to introduce students to basic accounting principles by outlining the society and culture of a pirate ship, highlighting the need to avoid violence and thwarted self-interest by carefully accounting for every item on the ship. Stu-

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