



Making Learning Fun and Social

SECOND LIFE AND OTHER VIRTUAL WORLDS HOLD PROMISE FOR A NEW GENERATION OF LEARNERS.

BY ANDERS GRONSTEDT

It's exhilarating and addictive. It's immersive and social. It's Web 2.0 in 3-D. Think "Matrix" meets Smurf Village, topped off with a dash of Facebook thrown in for good measure. It's virtual worlds, and it's all the rage.

Last year was a banner year for virtual worlds learning, with no fewer than 1,200 Second Life educational islands created.

Universities and corporate learning organizations by the hundreds are already betting that the future of online interaction won't be built on flat, static Web pages but rather in traversable 3-D spaces. IBM is investing millions of dollars in learning projects at 25 Second Life islands and already has some 8,000 employees conducting meeting and learning activities in Second Life. They are collaborating, role playing, simulating, scavenger hunting, job interviewing, mentoring and hanging out in

the booming virtual world of Second Life.

Communicating, learning and collaborating remotely have never been so much fun. Finally, a break from the drudgery of staring at your phone while talking to disembodied voices on a conference call or watching a PowerPoint during a Webinar.

WHAT IT IS

In the virtual world, you are "seeing" the meeting in an immersive 3-D environ-

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ment. You're moving your avatar around in a 3-dimensional world, interacting with other people through their avatars, by talking straight to your computer via a headset. As you move around, the sound changes direction, all at an extremely high sound quality. The sound from an avatar located to the right of your avatar will come from your right speaker. It's sound in 3-D. Green waves radiate from the avatar that is talking, as it starts gesturing. You can also chat or IM, gesture and change appearance.

It is an immersive environment that keeps participants completely focused on the task at hand. Besides, if they drift to other desktop activities, their avatar would quickly slump over and fall asleep, an embarrassing reminder to everyone that his mind and fingers have wandered off.

Virtual worlds represent a "perfect-storm" convergence of social media, simulations and gaming, and if we can believe the latest Gartner Group research, 80 percent of active Internet users will be in non-gaming virtual worlds by the end of 2011.

What makes this environment different

from traditional training is that it's first person. Instead of learning that is mediated by symbolic language of books, PowerPoints and voice-over narration, virtual worlds are experiential, interactive, fast-paced, multi-modal, multisensory and collaborative. People who spend time in virtual world don't think of their experiences as "virtual," because they are, in fact, real.

These experiences promise to do for learning what "first-person shooter games" did to gaming. The idea of a "first-person thinking game" would make educational theorists as far back as Aristotle proud. He pointed out that one cannot learn what one has not personally experienced. Virtual world offers ample opportunity for learning-by-doing.

More to the point, virtual worlds offer a new way to socialize. We know from research that one of the primary reasons people stay at the same company is that they're well tied into the social fabric of the organization. Companies lose top performers because they aren't sufficiently mentored or connected. Virtual worlds like Second Life offer a unique opportunity to facilitate serendipitous connections and

conversations. When did you last strike up a conversation with a new person during an e-learning program or Webinar? Those kinds of conversations happens all the time in virtual worlds.

EXPLORING

Virtual worlds can't be described, they have to be experienced. In the words of Morpheus, "no one can be told what the matrix is; you have to see it for yourself."

One way to understand virtual worlds is to open a free Second Life account, download the software reader, and create your own avatar. Start your exploration by visiting a serious meeting. They are listed on Second Life's Website and "in world" when you hit the "Search" button. This author is hosting a weekly Second Life meetings at Gronstedt Group's "Train for Success," which continue to grow as we attract more and more expert speakers and participants with each passing week. Get a good headset and come as you are — whether that's as Darth Vader, a giant spider or an enhanced digital version of your "first-life" self.

After a visit or two to a virtual world meeting, any traditional e-learning pro-

gram is going to appear flat, soulless and boring with no chance of capturing the imagination of today's digital native employees.

WHERE TO START?

Once you're sold, how do you sell it in your organization and get a program started?

Some organizations make the mistake of treating it as another top-down implementation project where employees are shoe-horned into a new software system. Instead, start in small scale. Set up a "Skunk Work" project. Rent an area in an open virtual world like Second Life or Active Worlds to hold a class and get some feedback, or negotiate a trial license with one of the private virtual world providers. Hold a meeting with the training group just to get warm in your clothes. Pilot and test. Solve specific problems. Get immediate feedback. Build internal success stories. Iron out kinks early and create a groundswell of support and an army of evangelists. Aggregate upward and outward to generate scale and drive the organization toward enterprise-level adoption.

What kind of learning challenges are best



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addressed by such a pilot? Examples of “low-hanging fruit” that are particularly appropriate for a first virtual world pilot are new-hire introduction and sales training.

Large numbers of new employees are frequently “digital natives” who have grown up with 3-D games and will appreciate a company that “gets it.” They might not have experience with Second Life, per se, but with numerous other 3-D environments. In addition, new hires are equipped with brand new computers, which are souped-up to run the virtual world without hang-ups. Imagine sending new employees through a time machine in Second Life to see the company’s storied history; have them walk around 3-D models of factory floors, call centers and offices around the world — facilities they might never get to experience first-hand during their career at the company; walk around and fly around 3-D models of the company’s products and meet with other young people who are about to start at the company.

Sales training and product roll-outs are other common virtual world applications. Companies will role-play sales skills, show models of new products, host guest speakers. Sales reps are typically geographically dispersed, motivated to learn and eager to socialize with colleagues.

Virtual worlds provide learning organizations a powerful, unique ability to engage and empower employees in ways that accommodate their digital lifestyles, adapt to their individual learning needs and encourage collaboration. It is revolutionary, but it’s not an overnight revolution. For now, the virtual worlds can be perplexing and intimidating. It is a lot like the World Wide Web in 1993-94: clunky and slow, but we could all see the potential. Most companies aren’t clamoring for a place in virtual worlds yet as the notion is still new and the learning benefits are still emerging. But dismissing the importance of Web 3D technologies that millions are already using in learning strategy would be like dismissing the Internet in 1994. ☹

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al-world programs, pod and vodcasting, video-based simulations and other innovative learning approaches. Join him and other learning professionals every Thursday from

noon to 1 p.m. Eastern time at “Train for Success” in Second Life to discuss learning implications of virtual worlds, teleport from www.gronstedtgroup.com.



Predictably, a number of training vendors and organizations are already in hot pursuit to make virtual worlds boring. They are trying to make the virtual worlds a reflection of corporate America instead of making it a playground for learning and exploration. By insisting on doing “old things in new ways” instead of “new things in new ways,” they are eliminating some of the critical features that make the virtual world unique and appealing. Just take these examples:

- >> One training vendor is already hawking a virtual worlds platform that replaces the customizable avatars with a handful of default male avatars in suit and tie and female avatars in dress pants that all look like they are 45 years old. What 20-year-old would want to be in a virtual world as a 45-year-old person in suit and tie? And more to the point, what 45-year-old wants to be reminded about his receding hairline by his avatar? What kind of virtual world doesn’t let you be young, sexy, brawny, or let you fly, ride your pet elephant, dance salsa, or even drink a cup of steaming hot java? The ability to express your personality through your avatar and communicate with playful expressions and inventory items is an integral part of the virtual worlds experience.
- >> A virtual worlds platform by another vendor doesn’t offer instant messaging, which is one of the most popular ways to communicate in Second Life.
- >> In a gorgeous world of rolling grass-covered hills and snowy mountains, lush green cattle pastures, eucalyptus forests, aspens that sway gently in the breeze, majestic waterfalls with musically tinkling water, numerous learning organizations have created sterile classrooms, conference facilities and auditoriums. As if we don’t have enough of those in our real lives.

In taking all the fun out of virtual worlds, the digital immigrant generation is declaring its own irrelevance to the new generation of digital natives. Training departments that use new technology to deliver the same old straight-laced training courses have to brace themselves for a train wreck as digital natives enter the workforce.

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