

Introduction

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1. Why This Book?

Virtual Worlds (VWs) are no longer merely the domain of youthful “gamers” (Michael & Chen, 2006; Thomas & Brown, 2009) operating on the edges of the communications envelope. On the contrary, VWs and their associated avatars are taking a central place in the way that millions of people spend their time undertaking a wide variety of activities including socialising, commerce, business meetings, staff recruitment, testing and model-building, and yes, acting out their fantasies as well! (Beck & Wade, 2006; Percival, 2008; Aldrich, 2004; Gee, 2007; Terdiman, 2008; Gibson, Aldrich, & Prensky, 2007).

A range of training and development activities also take place in VWs, with academic institutions and companies exploring the benefits of an immersive environment in which participants can interact with each other as well as with their instructor, even if they are thousands of miles apart physically.

The term “exploring” is important: the use of VWs is still an emerging field, and although many experiments are in progress, it is still the case that only a tiny minority of people use VWs as an integral part of their professional lives. Indeed, as can be seen in the following chapters, none of the learners had had previous experience of Second Life. In June 2009, 69,000 people worldwide had a Positive Monthly Linden Flow (PMLF), that is, made more money than they spent in Second Life. There are possibly several thousand more who use Second Life for professional purposes with little or no financial impact (such as educators), but PMLF is a useful indicator of how many people are using Second Life “professionally” as a means of generating income.

In this book, we bring together a selection of chapters written by academics and practitioners who have been involved in developing learning activities using the Second Life platform. Our intention is to provide guidelines, suggestions and ideas as

well as to highlight the potential issues and problems arising when thinking about the use of VWs for educational purposes.

As the world of learning becomes ever more complex, educators are faced with an almost bewildering choice of medium, and keeping up with developments can in itself prove a major challenge. Expectations on the part of learners are also broadening, placing an increased burden of responsibility on educators to develop a range of learning opportunities, including podcasts, wikis, social networking, VOIP support and VW activities.

The latter platforms started out in the early 2000s, and they are still undergoing development in a number of areas including the technological infrastructure, the social construct (e.g., the rules and regulations governing allowable activities in-world), the economic and financial models being applied, and the markets that they are addressing.

As Table 1 demonstrates, in June 2008, there were already over 200 million registered avatars in nine VWs, *excluding* fantasy world massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and other “closed” VWs.

Another interesting aspect arising from this table is that there are still relatively few people in the over 20 age range registered in VWs. Educators can be forgiven for thinking that their Higher Education students are not interested in these platforms and that perhaps investments, whether in terms of time or money, are not worthwhile.

However, the younger teen generation is growing up using VWs (such as *Penguin Club*, *Habbo*, *Gaia*) as an integral part of their social and online lives. Within five years, this generation will be seeking placements at universities and in companies, and it will be as natural for them to turn to VWs as it is for older people today to seek information on the Internet. This implies that Higher Education establishments have a window of five to seven years to develop their VW presence or risk losing market share. Those that invest now have the luxury of relatively cheap “research time.” As the young teen generation comes of age, the investments required will increase dramatically with demand for qualified and experienced builders and script-writers outstripping supply (Heaton, 2007).

Table 1: Registered avatars in virtual worlds, June 2008.

	11–14 year olds	15–20 year olds	Over 20s	Web address
Whyville	3			www.whyville.net
Barbie Girls	13			www.barbiegirls.com
Club Penguin	19			www.clubpenguin.com
Habbo	100			www.habbo.com
Stardoll	21			www.stardoll.com
Gaia		13		www.gaiaonline.com
There		20		www.there.com
Second Life			15	www.secondlife.com
Activeworlds			1	www.activeworlds.com
Total (millions):	156	33	16	

It is not only the overall VW population that will increase. With the release of parts of its source code, Linden Labs has contributed to the development of the “OpenSim” project which in turn is spawning hundreds of new “worlds,” many of which are being designed for specific groups or uses.

It is already possible to download VWs onto PDAs and iPhones, with 90% of South Koreans in their twenties and 25% of the country using *Cyworld* to communicate with each other on their mobile phones (Shin, 2009). The biggest technological leap will occur when avatars are able to move from one world to another seamlessly and visit 3D websites. Once that happens, everyone will be expected to have at least one avatar. Educators ignore this technological trend at the peril of their professional credibility.

With this book our aim is to provide suggestions as to how educators can use one of these VWs – Second Life – to provide immersive learning experiences for their students and programme participants.

2. Why Second Life?

We decided to focus on Second Life for a number of reasons:

- It is currently the most popular platform for educators: as of summer 2009, there were over 4000 people registered in the SL Educators List (SLED), and the number of academic institutions establishing islands in SL grows daily, already reaching several hundreds (Second Life and Education, 2009).
- It is not a “game” world such as *World of Warcraft* – there are no gaming rules, no “levels” to achieve, no pre-designated roles and no scores. On the contrary, Second Life was designed to be as “open” a society as possible, and it is only due to legal requirements in California that certain restrictions have been imposed (e.g., gambling is not allowed “in-world,” and neither are there any banks).
- Unlike Forterra’s *Olive* platform, anyone can enter Second Life for free, and it is only those that wish to do so who spend real money buying virtual clothes and other virtual goods – this makes Second Life a cost-effective starting point for using VWs and encouraging others to do so.
- Second Life has a real economy, using “Linden Dollars” that can be converted freely into US Dollars (Castronova, 2005). For certain educational uses, such as in Business Administration programmes, this holds out the promise of enabling students to set up a real business, take real-life decisions and witness the real-time impact of those decisions on a real society. All of this within a “safe” environment, where the financial stakes are (relatively-speaking) minuscule. Three of the chapters in this book are business-education-orientated, although it is not our intention to suggest how to use Second Life to make money!
- As an “open” society, Second Life provides an environment conducive to serendipitous encounters with other people who would otherwise never meet. Indeed, a good example of this is that the editors of this book met by chance in

Second Life! This factor can at times cause certain difficulties and stresses (not everyone in Second Life behaves “professionally”), and it is one aspect that might be cause for concern for educators. On the other hand, since it is a “virtual” world, the potential damage is limited, whereas the potential advantages can be leveraged by educators to provide their participants with a much wider range of learning opportunities.

- Second Life may not be as technically advanced as certain other VWs, and this can occasionally cause dissatisfaction, especially on the part of some “digital natives.” However, there is a strong community of developers and programmers who are working to simplify the interface on the one hand while enabling a higher degree of integration with other platforms and programmes on the other. For “newbie” educators, this support network is of great assistance.
- Finally, although Second Life itself might not become the “killer app” it was originally heralded as, there can be no doubt that familiarity with its interface, opportunities and technical challenges will provide an excellent foundation upon which to build the competencies required to develop educational programmes in any other VW.

3. Structure and Content of This Book

The book is broadly divided into two parts: the first part (Chapters 1–6 inclusive) is more theoretical in nature, with a number of general issues related to the use of Second Life being discussed, including linkage to other fields of academic study. The second part (Chapters 7–12 inclusive) describes specific case studies and presents examples of how Second Life has been used for particular groups ranging from undergraduates to retired professionals.

Faced with the plethora of potential projects and papers to include in such a book, the editors decided to take an inductive approach to accommodate the high-quality and important topics from among the many submissions received. An alternative approach would have been deductive, assigning pre-selected topics to certain writers. But the latter approach would have allowed bias to filter the tumultuous experimentation and innovation being researched in Second Life higher education. As we embark on the second decade of the 21st century, codetermination of key content is increasingly the norm and appears to suit both the topic and culture of VWs.

The resulting volume might therefore appear to some less than “neat” or “sufficiently academic” in nature. But we trust that readers will nonetheless find valuable insights and helpful suggestions for their own explorations into the virtual universe.

The book opens at what might be considered the “negative” end of the spectrum: in Chapter 1, Dudeney and Ramsay lay out in detail the challenges and hurdles facing educators when they first attempt to develop a Second Life project from a number of perspectives – institutional, technical, pedagogical and end-user. Almost mirroring the entry into Second Life itself (the “first-hour” syndrome), if these

barriers can be overcome, then there are rewards to be obtained. Dudeney and Ramsey provide advice as to how to minimise these barriers so as to provide a rewarding experience for educators and participants.

In Chapter 2, Sherblom, Withers, and Leonard look at Second Life from the computer-mediated communications (CMC) perspective, concluding that despite the technological, instructional and interpersonal barriers arising, students find Second Life to be a versatile, useful communication medium through which to participate in group discussion, collaboration and brainstorming.

This chapter also highlights a recurring theme throughout the book: much of the feedback received from participants is not about the VW platform itself so much as the difficulties inherent in any online interaction, for example the difficulty in organising synchronous meetings, or the constraints of using text-chat, or the bandwidth requirements and occasional poor quality of voice chat (VOIP). As the technological infrastructure as a whole improves, so should these barriers tend to decline in importance.

Moving towards the positive end of the spectrum, in Chapter 3, Ball and Pearce suggest that the use of VWs for some learners is much more than a fad or gimmick – it is a way of interacting, developing skills and having experiences that simply could not occur in real life. VW platforms, while not a panacea to all pedagogic or access issues, are in the process of justifying their place as an addition to the suite of tools available to educators. This may be especially true in the case of learners who face accessibility issues, who are not as confident as others in real-world situations, or who have to practice entering stressful real-world scenarios.

Ball and Pearce provide a range of examples where Second Life has been used effectively to support learners facing such challenges, with the proviso that – as with all learning methodologies – educators need to ensure that they use the appropriate tool for the job at hand.

As previously mentioned, it comes as no surprise that academics are exploring Second Life's potential for business education. In Chapter 4, Love, Ross and Wilhelm present a survey into how business educators are using Second Life as a pedagogical tool, as well as the challenges they face before its full potential can be realised. They provide a sample lesson developed by a business professor, a discussion of students' responses to their Second Life experiences, and a note on the untapped potential of this VW for business education.

The benefits and challenges outlined in this chapter are by no means restricted to business education – on the contrary, there are insights and suggestions for educators for all subjects, including a list of SL tools that any Second Life educator will find helpful.

In Chapter 5, business education is again the focus, with Kaplan presenting the case study of how INSEAD Business School uses its presence in Second Life, along with suggestions as to how other educational institutions can best leverage their investment.

One of the issues he highlights is that to maximise its potential, Second Life should not be seen as merely an extension of a teaching situation into the VW – instead, institutions need to assess a range of investment options including promotion, student

and staff recruitment, information provision and even in-world activities to attract casual passers-by. One of the greatest “turn-offs” to VW visitors is an empty island!

Moving from the institutional level to the individual level, and using a more formalised academic paper style, in Chapter 6 Anderson presents the results of her research into Instructor Immediacy and its impact on students in Second Life. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the research findings suggest that nonverbal immediacy is important for instructors who are currently teaching, or are planning to teach, in Second Life. What is interesting about this research is that immediacy behaviours are important at all – it relates not only to the fact that the instructor must be seen to be “present,” but that his/her avatar should be seen to behave in a manner consistent with “good” teaching practice. For example, the instructor’s avatar needs to face the student avatars, gesticulate appropriately, even smile and use other paralinguistic effects. This suggests that educators need to be keenly aware of the impact their avatars have on their students and be able to master a range of techniques within Second Life to enhance the feeling of proximity between instructor and student.

Chapter 7 opens the second part of the book where the focus shifts from more general concepts (albeit with examples) to specific case studies of how Second Life has been used within developmental programmes. Belei, Noteborn and de Ruyter describe how they provided an immersive experience for their Brand Management students, thus helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The project made use of Second Life’s Linden Dollar economy to assess student creativity (in both SL and RL), commitment and understanding of marketing theory.

They conclude that:

(the use of virtual worlds) results not only in a competitive advantage in attracting good students, but ultimately provides a whole new dimension to the present teaching and learning environment.

Balkun, Trotta and Zedeck present a case study in Chapter 8 which underscores the move from teacher as “communicator of knowledge” to student as “builder of knowledge.” Over three different programmes, students of literature have built the House of 7 (after Hawthorne’s novel, the House of Seven Gables) within Second Life, including highly detailed furnishings, interactive tasks for visitors and more general information about the literature of the period.

This case study provides an example of how Second Life projects can be presented to the “external” world: the build is open to the general public, thus providing a degree of motivation that can be missing from a “closed” class project. Knowing that their work will be scrutinised by passers-by, students clearly spent a great deal of time researching and scripting to achieve desired effects.

Additionally, the fact that the project has been incrementally improved by succeeding cohorts establishes a continuity that is perhaps lacking in other case studies. As the authors point out, the build provides a degree of permanence that is difficult to replicate in a normal educational setting. Most student assignments end up in instructors’ filing cabinets, with some perhaps making it into a web repository.

In Second Life, the results of the students' energy and effort will remain for some time to come, a monument to their learning.

Although the focus of the previous chapter was on creativity rather than building, Chapter 9 is almost the reverse: Gu, Gul, Nakapan and Williams describe how they developed a programme for Design Learning across two university groups – one in Newcastle, Australia and the other in Thailand – that worked collaboratively on the design of virtual “homes.” The freedom from gravity and other “worldly” constraints allowed the design students to build prototype virtual homes that stretched their creative and collaborative skills, allowing them to think “outside the box” and communicate synchronously in ways that would be extremely difficult to replicate using any other distance technology.

Both the following Chapters – 10 and 11 – deal with an area where VWs can also excel: their use for role play. In Chapter 10, Ewins, Littleton, Macleod and Morse provide an example of how Second Life can be used to enable students – in this case, following an MSc in E-Learning programme – to practice appraisal feedback skills in a manner that allows a degree of reflection and “separation” compared to role plays in “real life.” Here, the authors conducted an experiment using volunteers from the programme and they report back on their findings, concluding that in the future, companies might use such an approach for appraisals in the “real world.”

This links directly to Chapter 11, in which the Open University authors Broadribb, Peachey, Carter and Westrap have also experimented with using Second Life for performance appraisal training, in this case with staff members undergoing training provided by the HR department. This takes us beyond the envelope of “Higher Education” into the area of executive education, since the “students” are preparing to use performance appraisal skills not as part of a degree programme, but as part and parcel of their professional lives. Broadribb et al. underline the value of involving non-academic staff in VWs, as well as the challenges inherent in attempting to implement what some perceive as being a “frivolous game” into an organisation's development strategy.

In the final chapter of this book, Eaton, Jarmon, Traphagan and Traphagan again take us beyond Higher Education into the realm of Lifelong Learning, and specifically the potential benefits of Second Life (and other VWs) for the “silver” generation. Although only a few of the “students” on the programme actually made it into Second Life on their own, the possibilities of increased socialisation, improved communication with younger generations, the sheer fun of being able to visit virtual historical and cultural builds clearly had a positive impact on the target group. This chapter highlights the fact that VWs are not merely for the young, but rather for the young at heart, whatever their age and interests.

4. Some Initial Conclusions Arising

As with any emergent technology, there are a number of challenges to overcome in the use of VW platforms, not the least of which are the psychological and cultural

barriers arising from the view that VWs are merely some kind of “game.” Neither will VWs ever be able to supplant all the benefits of face-to-face interactions, especially as there are always likely to be technological glitches or time differences hindering smooth synchronous communication.

On the other hand, we can no longer avoid the fact that VWs, in one form or another, have become part of the technological infrastructure. There are millions of people, especially pre- and young teens, now using VWs as their networking platform of choice. The full impact of this has yet to be felt in Higher Education institutions, but some educational explorers are beginning to develop strategies and approaches that will stand them (and their institutions) in good stead when that moment arrives.

In this book, we have just begun to scrape the tip of a creative new world – there are hundreds of educational projects being developed in Second Life (de Lucia, Passero, Francese, & Tortora, 2009; Larvin, 2009) ranging from geographical through medical to archaeological. There will soon be thousands of such projects. We hope to have provided glimpses into the potential benefits and uses of virtuality without obscuring the issues involved.

We trust you enjoy your exploration of this “brave new world.”

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Charles Wankel is Associate Professor of Management at St. John's University, New York. He received his doctorate from New York University. Charles has authored and edited many books including the best-selling *Management*, 3rd ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1986), *Rethinking Management Education for the 21st Century* (IAP, 2002), *Educating Managers with Tomorrow's Technologies* (IAP, 2003), *the Cutting-Edge of International Management Education* (IAP, 2004), *Educating Managers through Real World Projects* (IAP, 2005), *New Visions of Graduate Management Education* (IAP, 2006), *University and Corporate Innovations in Life-Long Learning* (IAP, 2007), *Innovative Approaches to Reducing Global Poverty* (IAP, 2008), *Alleviating Poverty through Business Strategy* (IAP, 2008), *Handbook of 21st Century Management* (SAGE, 2008), *Global Sustainability Initiatives: New Models and New Approaches* (IAP, 2008), *Innovative Approaches to Global Sustainability* (Palgrave, 2008), *Encyclopedia of Business in Today's World* (SAGE, 2009), and the forthcoming *Being and Becoming a Management Education Scholar* (IAP, 2008), *Emerging Ethical Issues of Life in Virtual Worlds* (IAP, 2009), and *Management through Collaboration: Teaming in a Networked World* (Routledge, 2010) an introductory management textbook with over 900 coauthors from 90 nations. He is the leading founder and director of scholarly virtual communities for management professors, currently directing eight of these with thousands of participants in more than 70 nations. Charles has taught in Lithuania at the Kaunas University of Technology (Fulbright Fellowship) and the University of Vilnius (United Nations Development Program and Soros Foundation funding).