NERCOMP | NorthEast Regional Computing Program

Thomas COLLEGE

**NERCOMP EVENT**
**Second Life Users Group (SLUG): Virtual Worlds for Teaching & Learning**
October 17, 2007
Colleen Burnham

**Purpose for Attendance**

"Gartner predicts 80% of Fortune 500 companies will be in Second Life in 4 years. This was also brought up at President's Council yesterday and I've been reading a lot about it in the Chronicle of Higher Ed." (Chris Rhoda, Sept. 2007)

As a virtual world (VW) complete with its own economy, Second Life (SL) is becoming an environment for which copyright and tort law, along with the codification of ethical behavior, are increasingly being discussed. Included in formal discussion is the concern for the obvious and inherent covert behaviors of its member *Avatars*; the possibility for deception at all levels of interaction creates a myriad of potential abuse.

Besides the potential for abuse (which is always present in any virtual medium), the VW, and specifically SL, introduces an environment that allows real life (RL) business a new medium and venue for advertising, selling, teaching, and data mining. For an institution such as Thomas, where much of the focus is put on the business model for operation, and on educating business students, SL offers both an *opportunity to advertise the institution*, and a *potential classroom "space"* for "experiencing" the process of creating and maintaining an "actual" company.

Working with a premise that college students are essentially expert "gamers", it seems probable that Thomas students would benefit from the opportunity to interact with SL academically. Hypothetically the level of *student engagement* could be increased as a function of having participated in the building of a VW learning environment, as well as from having attending classes virtually. Additionally, the processes of *recruitment* at and *branding* of Thomas College potentially can be enhanced by having a presence in SL that can be visited by anyone who "teleports" into the "world".

**The meeting…**

**The Evolution of the Internet: Using "Virtual Worlds' to Enhance Teaching, Learning and Scholarly Research**
**Speaker: Bret Ingerman, Vice President for Computing and Information Services, Vassar College**

In the 1990s the World Wide Web went from being an interesting technical concept to an essential communication tool. Yet despite the fact that the present iteration of the web involves a good deal more interaction (think of wikis and blogs), the online experience remains a relatively solitary one. The advent of new "virtual world" software provides us with online environments that are fundamentally more social and immersive than has been possible previously.

The popular press has begun to write extensively about virtual worlds software in general, and Second Life (from Linden Labs) in particular. Indeed, many schools have begun to establish outposts in these virtual worlds to see just how these environments can support their educational mission. The present crop of virtual world software, such as Second Life, provides a rich set of easy to use tools that allow anyone to create and manipulate a virtual environment than can then be experienced by others singly or collaboratively, in real time. The possibilities of using such environments to enhance teaching, learning and scholarly research are limited only by the imagination.

This session will examine the various technologies that have converged to make virtual worlds a viable platform for exploration. We explore what Second Life in particular has to offer, compare and contrast it to other present and emerging technologies, and discuss the opportunities tools such as Second Life present to us. We will also spend some time discussing the legitimate concerns that some have expressed about virtual worlds, from their "adult" or "commercial" nature to the real-world potential for social isolation that it can lead to, and see how or if those concerns are different in virtual worlds as compared to other internet based tools.

No prior experience is necessary to attend the presentation: all that is needed is inquisitiveness.

Mr. Ingerman discussed Virtual Worlds (VW) in the context of a project at Vassar College for which he was asked to create a virtual Vassar campus. The formal purpose of the project was to test the environment empirically, to attempt to build a VW in which current and potential students could learn how to interact in an environment that is inherently "non-social" and egocentric. The project was designed as an aggressive attempt to leap into the *immersive* web environment (Web 3.0) to augment the current *interactive* web (Web 2.0). To the extent that Vassar has accomplished a Second Life presence, Mr. Ingerman et al. have seen positive results.

*My notes re: Mr. Ingerman's presentation:*

- Second Life reports that 9.2 million accounts were created as of August 2007; 6.1 accounts are unique individuals. Demographically, 38% of the users are between the ages of 25 and 34 years old; 29% of all users are from the United States; 58% are male; 42% are female (all is self-reported).

- LindenLabs is a platform tool (as compared to a "game" environment). Everything in SL is created by its residents.
- Linden Dollars: USD $1.00 = Linden $250
    - LindenX (Linden Exchange): $1 billion Linden $ exchanged in (by?) August 2007 → $6.6 million USD
- *Avatar*: virtual representation of the user
- *Island*: owned or rented space in SL which is really a dedicated server sold as real estate (cost: approx $2,700)
- *X, y, z coordinates*: place in SL (avatars can move "3 dimensionally", right, left, forward, back, and flying)
- *PRIMS*: primitive objects used for building everything in SL. (triangle, square, rectangle, etc.)
- *Textures*: the look of everything in SL (all texture is created in PhotoShop - .jpgs – and applied as 512 x 512 images) – a large building may require up to 1,000 "pieces")
- Video sources are stored *off* SL – html links created cause sources to appear in SL
- Intellectual Property is handled minimally by LindenLab → items may be sold, but not resold; any copyright issues are left to the responsibility of the avatar/owner.
- No .pdf uploading available
- 15,000 objects per avatar/owner
- "*very steep learning curve"* for all users: creators, visitors, implementers (IT)
- Requires teams of collaborators to create effective spaces, including students, IT, IL, faculty, general administrators

Example of Real Life (RL) businesses that have a presence in SL:

Dell, Sears (virtual kitchen design), Pontiac, Sundance Film (sells DVDs via SL), NBA, Coldwell Banker (experimenting with acting as a VW real estate company)

General concerns:

- *No* privacy – although restrictions and privacy options can be purchased
- *Commercial* – adult oriented → user-education necessary for effective and safe use
- *No formal Acceptable Use or Ethical Code* in place – although avatar owners can force policies with purchased options (See the Vassar "Sistine Chapel" entrance)
- *Social?* – research is inconclusive

Problems with VW and SL:

- Essentially BETA
- *Very steep learning curve*
- Constantly changing
- Constant upgrades
- System downtime currently scheduled for Wednesdays, 9-12 am
- Minimal tech support (Island purchase comes with a 24/7 800 support number)
- Anonymity
- *Desktop horsepower* (note: I am unable to enter SL from my office desktop. *cjb*)
- Constant, random crashing
- *no local back-up*
- requires SL-specific development tools

**The Virtual Sistine Chapel**

Speaker: Steve Taylor, Director, Academic Computing Services, Vassar College

Vassar College created a replica of the Sistine Chapel in Second Life, which was immediately inundated with visitors. It has been described in numerous of blogs, and snapshots had been posted at flickr.com. Eight weeks after its debut, there had been more than 3,000 visits. This presentation will show the site and include a discussion of the challenges of replicating art and architecture in a virtual world.

Mr. Taylor, as a member of the Vassar SL campus project, created a replica of the Sistine Chapel as a demonstration of how the use of an additional "3-D like" environment can be useful to the classroom instructor. The Sistine Chapel component required extensive research specific to both copyright and intellectual property law, and the location of the actual photographs that were used for "building" the chapel. A "Code of Conduct" was developed to remind avatars that as a replica, visitors must maintain a respectful presence while "inside" the chapel; avatars that do not agree to the terms are evicted from the chapel.

Discoveries in the process include:

- Resolution is low → artistic value is sacrificed in favor of spatial relationships.
- *Very steep learning curve* for both creating and using
- Vandalism is non-existence – only an avatar/owner can alter an image
- Creation is time-intensive → 2 full-time weeks (not work-weeks) required to create the one building
- Creation requires more than just an idea → "vision of the current pedagogy…"
- Rude behavior is peer driven → "mouthiness" isn't tolerated; bad behavior eventually self-selects *out* of the environment.

**Art Mecho: Building a Virtual Art Museum in Second Life**
Speaker: Christopher Bolton, Assistant Professor of Japanese, Dept. of Asian Studies and Program in Comparative Literature, Williams College

We will describe a collaborative project between faculty, students, and instructional technology staff at Williams College to design and construct a virtual art museum in Second Life.

The build, called the Art Mecho Museum (http://artmecho.org), is devoted to interactive art that highlights the relationship between work and viewer in animated and sequential art, especially Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation). It is designed as a kind of pedagogical laboratory to test theoretical ideas about the reception of animation, by forcing the viewer to animate him or herself as s/he encounters the art, and to think about what this means.

The museum was designed by Williams faculty member Christopher Bolton and built by students at the college, with support from instructional technology staff. During the presentation, Prof. Bolton will describe the ideas behind the project--focusing on the pedagogical opportunities SL affords for literature, film, and theory courses. Jonathan Leamon and other IT staff will describe the process of building the museum, which was constructed by student interns who had no previous exposure to SL, in a series of short, intense virtual barn raising sessions over the summer.

Dr. Bolton's project held many interesting components. The completed project not only offers his students a venue and medium for novel creation and study, it is an ongoing opportunity for institutional learning collaboration. The project demonstrates a business model of project management that uses skills and expertise from members from the entire campus community: student interns (creativity and curiosity), art faculty (theory), business faculty (economic development), IT and library staff (technical and copyright issues), administration (financial and conceptual support). Each of the categories of participants specialized at further diverse levels.

*This was a very interesting application of the tool that Second Life really is; as compared to a potential opportunity for changing pedagogical style, it augments current pedagogy.*

My notes….

- Rent or buy pieces of an island to ensure "good neighbors"
- Assets/positive project collaboration points
    - UTube has lots of effective tutorials
    - "Barn Raising" Model
    - assign the responsibilities according to the skills brought to the project
    - large group to encourage a diverse collection of ideas
- issues/problems with the project
    - large group – too many ideas
    - more non-SL jobs could have been assigned/delegated
    - *more professional staff experience before beginning project*
    - *no local back-up*
    - "institutional ownership" not easy/intuitive

**Interview with an Avatar: Real Tales of Second Life and The Life Academic**
Speaker: Dennis Moser, Digital Services Librarian, Bridgewater State College

Second Life may or may not represent the future of education. Making the choice of how you will be involved means understanding the options available to you and what better way to learn of them than by talking to users of this exciting environment? The presentation will cover the mechanics of using SL, discussions with active participants as to the positives and the negatives of working in and using the environment, possible future directions evolving from the current environment, and how end-users can be more directly involved in guiding and shaping those futures through such developments as the Open Grid Forum and OSGrid.

Interestingly, Mr. Moser uses SL as a venue for producing and performing art (music and video). While the presentation was entertaining, he discussed the same issues brought up by the others, even allowing the other presenters to field questions.

**Experiential Learning in Second Life**
Speakers:
Hilary Mason, Johnson & Wales University Hilary Mason, Assistant Professor, New Media and Computer Science, Johnson & Wales University
Mehdi Moutahir, Department Chair and Director, Johnson & Wales University

Imagine learning business planning by opening your own store, conversational French by meeting for tea in Morocco every Tuesday afternoon, or cell biology by tagging along for a day with some mitochondria. Virtual environments make these experiences – and more – accessible and affordable. This vast expansion of opportunities leads to new methods and models of teaching and learning. We'll discuss best practices for creating immersive learning experiences developed through the creation of Virtual Morocco, a platform for cultural exchange and promotion of tourism, Virtual BLAST, a scientific ballooning educational project, and a new Experimental Entrepreneurship intiative.

Dr.. Moutahir's project presentation was very interesting and similar to Dr. Bolten's. The primary difference between the two SL VWs is that the Johnson & Wales "world" has been designed specifically as an environment in which students can create and or augment entrepreneurship, acting either as the actual company or for the benefit of other entrepreneurs. The project use and implementation of SL onto the Johnson & Wales campus began with group of volunteer students (students who were interested in the process and the

project) and has culminated in an actual academic program for volunteerism and entrepreneurship. Students are able to “work” in the VW as marketing specialists, business consultants, etc. for academic credit in their business and or marketing major. As with the Williams College experience, the intent was to build an immersive learning experience for the benefit of all members of the campus community; the business model use has been a successful project on all levels.

**My recommendations based on the presentations (cjb)**

The use-models presented by Dr. Bolten et al., and Dr. Moutahir et al. are worthy of serious consideration at Thomas. The impact of positive collaboration on the engagement level of the students, faculty, and staff is noteworthy if not significant. While VW activity encourages immersion by virtue of the avatar existence and interaction, it seems that currently avatar use to take full advantage of the medium. The opportunity to build a world in which a company will exist, and then to maintain that world and company, offers a venue for applied use of theoretical concepts that are simply not available in the “real world”.

The technical skills gleaned from each of the two projects, by all participants, enhances the academic experience in several majors of study at the same time that it forces a collaboration of major disciplines. In addition to general cross discipline collaboration, other institutional departments (e.g., admissions) become involved as contributors and participants specific to recruiting and branding as the project(s) develops; spin-off projects such as virtual campus tours, and the generation of contact lists are inherent to project development.

I would like to invite one or both of the presenting teams to Thomas to introduce their respective virtual worlds and to talk about the use-model each employed.