Online virtual world platforms such as Second Life have generated a public-private space that is already being used as an effective personal learning environment (PLE) across many sectors. New developments and designs are appearing rapidly, including new technologies for how we interface with computers as well as new input devices. It seems clear, however, that 3-D virtual worlds in whatever form will be increasingly used as knowledge and social interaction management tools in the foreseeable future, and as such, we might more accurately refer to them as social learning environments with a strong sense of embodiment. Elsewhere (Jarmon, in press), I have focused on the emergence of homo virtualis, where, in an ecology of virtual contexts, learners inhabit a broader landscape of their own and others’ making that allows them to be teachers, designers, researchers, communicators, and collaborators.

As Guest Editor of this 2-part special issue of the IJVPLE, I have had the pleasure of working with the authors whose papers focus on Second Life and personal learning environments from diverse perspectives.

In the first article, Lorri Mon explores active learning techniques supporting independent and collaborative learning within Second Life as a virtual personal learning environment. She challenges the replication of traditional classroom lectures and examines an array of learning experiences that are engaging and responsive to learners’ needs, including games, problem-solving scenarios, experiential and service learning, role-play, tours, guest speakers, events, and creative activities such as building, programming/scripting, movie-making, and publishing.

Building on the active nature of the learning tasks explored by Mon, next Michael DeMers specifically integrates Kolb and Kolb’s (2005) theory of experiential learning into his analysis of three concrete examples of discovery exercises designed for geography courses in Second Life. Beyond providing a personal learning environment, Demers demonstrates how such approaches, designed to work for the accommodators (learners best adapted to experiential learning activities), can also act as surrogates for real-world experiences that are either impossible or logistically problematic.

Kelly Black, a professor of mathematics, then drills down and provides us with a very close examination of the use of Second Life as a way to explore Newton’s Second Law. Students studying basic mechanics create SL scripts and conduct virtual experiments on the movement of objects using simple forces and under the influence of gravity. Black addresses the challenges required when a learning activity requires a wide range of technical abilities with a steep initial learning curve, and he also identifies advantages that make such efforts worthwhile.

In the fourth article on reproductive physiology and modeling of the human testis, Douglas
Danforth argues that the immersive character of Second Life provides a personal learning environment for medical students within which to explore novel approaches to medical education that would otherwise be impossible. Danforth leads us through a careful description of modeling doctor-patient interaction, teaching clinical diagnosis skills, and creating three-dimensional molecular and cellular models of objects from individual molecules to whole organ systems, both healthy and diseased.

Charles Hamilton, Kristen Langlois and Henry Watson, all with IBM Canada, next present a case study on how the IBM Center For Advanced Learning uses Second Life for virtual speed mentoring. Hamilton et al. analyze how informal educational uses of Second Life create personal and social learning environments that can bridge global distances in ways that can be effective as well as inexpensive.

Finally, this first edition of the special issue ends with Sarah Smith-Robbins’ review of the book by Thomas M. Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Smith-Robbins’ insightful observations include a comparison between the Linden Lab world described by Malaby and the responsibility in the world of education to create spaces where learners can discover goals on their own terms.

REFERENCES
