Chapter 9

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow’s Recognition of Industry Applications within Virtual Worlds:
A Meta-Analysis of Distance Learning Instructional Achievements within Virtual World Architectural Environments, and Potential Implications for Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this chapter is to provide an analysis of business and industry case-based implementations of instructional opportunities within the Second Life three-dimensional virtual world environment, so as to delineate distance learning instructional achievements within virtual worlds and engage in a discussion related to potential implications for higher education. This provides the essential link between distance learning imperatives within the business and industry realm through a meta-analysis of industry’s virtual world distance learning case-based projects. This analysis offers a framework through which to emphasize the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning projects from yesterday and today, with implications towards tomorrow’s higher education distance education learning environments within virtual worlds. The framework through which this occurs is a focused presentation of the cases under review, followed by discussions related to: major areas of concern, integral distance

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INTRODUCTION

As business and industry embraces the strengths of distance learning within virtual world environments, there are a growing number of case studies available. However, up to this point in time, there has not been a thorough analysis of the available business and industry case studies. As such, it is timely and of utmost importance to analyze the distance learning instructional achievements of business and industry within virtual world environments, so as to delineate distance learning instructional achievements within virtual worlds and engage in a discussion related to potential implications for higher education. Further, it is imperative to focus upon potential implications for the success of higher education institutions within virtual worlds. This meta-analysis results in major areas of concern, integral distance learning considerations, and successes of the business and industry world within virtual worlds. Following this focus, a discussion related to potential implications and tomorrow’s innovations will be discussed, that will directly assist and advance the efforts of higher education’s distance learning opportunities within three-dimensional virtual world gaming environments.

BACKGROUND

The virtual world has always polarized persons within all realms of society, from the persons who eagerly engage in the virtual world environment and clearly articulate its potential, to the other end of the spectrum wherein people are comfortable in their “real” life and don’t find the virtual gaming environment to hold the same “pull” for their time and attention. Of course, the reality of the societal world is that all things do change, and it is of utmost importance for different realms within society to try and engage with collegial professionals and customers where the professionals and customers naturally assemble. But what is a virtual world? Melbourne Laneways (n.d.) offers the explanation that, “Virtual worlds are computer-based two or three dimensional simulated environments that enable users to inhabit and interact with others through chat, instant messaging and voice, via ‘avatars’” (p. 2). As suggested by Gronstedt (2007), “Never has the adage that ‘on the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog’ been more true” (paragraph 5). Interesting questions are posed by Dignan (2006), which reflects concerns of those in business and industry, who are slow to engage in the virtual world gaming environment:

I just don’t get the appeal for companies or gamers. My other nagging question: Are corporate activi-