Chapter 2
Virtual Worlds: Corporate Early Adopters Pave the Way

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ABSTRACT
Multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs), the most popular of which is Second Life, have great potential to provide engaging, interactive content to today’s students using both synchronous and asynchronous delivery. Educators, as well as several forward-thinking corporations and military organizations, have proven to be early adopters of MUVEs as a training delivery medium, paving the way to begin evaluating the medium for use in professional development. The use of MUVEs for education will definitely grow. Corporations considering venturing into this arena would do well to consider the lessons learned by the early adopters, paying particular attention to the barriers that need to be overcome for successful implementation.

VIRTUAL WORLDS: CORPORATE EARLY ADOPTERS PAVE THE WAY
In the continuing quest for effective delivery methods for distance education, multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs), also known as virtual worlds (VWs), have become popular at the university and secondary school levels and, to some extent, in corporate training. While use is still varied, both in quantity and quality, early adopters—educators and several corporate learning officers—provide ample evidence of the value of MUVEs as an instructional delivery medium. Although VWs are being used successfully for professional development and training, efforts to evaluate their effectiveness are still in early stages. Corporations that are considering venturing into MUVEs should consider the lessons learned by these early adopters, particularly in terms of the barriers that need to be overcome for successful implementation.

The evolution of multi-user virtual environments spans a long, logical, and progressive past. Although there are many in existence today, serv-
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ing a variety of age groups and demographics, the best known is probably Second Life™ (SL). Launched in 2003 by Linden Lab Technologies, SL is a finite “grid” that currently accommodates millions of users around the world (WebProNews, 2009), although the number of “residents” logged in and actively using the service on a daily basis is estimated at closer to 60,000† (SL website, 2009).

Researchers suggest that the development of virtual worlds is based on a merging of gaming and social networking (Messinger, Stroulia & Lyons, 2008). Gaming began as interactive arcade games with tactical and strategic goals and has undergone a series of evolutionary changes. Early single-player, off-line games became multi-player, off-line games and then progressed to single- and multi-player networked games including those played via internet connectivity. The next step was unstructured games, which developed into those in which the player generates the content; the current stage features multiplayer online role-playing environments.

Evolving separately, social networking has increased in popularity as it meets a variety of social and networking goals manifested in products such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, My Space, and Skype. These environments support members pursuing their own objectives of socializing and sharing information (Messinger, Stroulia & Lyons, 2008).

While SL is often thought of as a game it is, in fact, anything but. Kalning (2007) notes that typically games include both structured and unstructured goals as well as objectives for completion. Games have limits and theoretically, persistence and skill will allow the participant to win by reaching the outer limits of the established environment. However, in SL there is no inherent conflict or goals set by the programmer (Kalning, 2007). The goals and objectives are set by the users according to their individual needs. The only limit is one’s imagination, since SL users create their own content and their own ever-changing objectives. Simultaneously, many “residents” are drawn to the environment by the opportunities for social networking and personalized goal achievement.

REAL LIFE USES FOR SECOND LIFE

Many organizations are seeking to establish a presence in virtual worlds. Although several initially envisioned SL as a commercial environment, that narrow vision only skims the surface. Educators have proven to be active, early adopters and have built a strong presence in SL, using the environment to conduct classes, collaborate with peers, and participate in conferences that they might otherwise be unable to attend. Several universities have established a presence using SL to conduct classes synchronously (Lagorio, 2007). Government agencies, including the military, as well as corporations, use it for teleconferencing, role-play, and simulation (New England Business Bulletin, 2009). Many of these organizations also use SL for recruitment (TMP, 2007).

The collaborative and active nature of a MUVE is being shown to offer creative possibilities for delivering learner-centered, engaging educational content with practical application and interaction at several levels:

- **Person-person.** Learners interact with other learners, instructors, or “the general public.”
- **Person-object.** Learners interact with discrete objects or a particular environment.
- **Person-self.** Both instructors and learners find the MUVE setting engenders new roles and encourages self-reflection.

PERSON-PERSON INTERACTION

A MUVE is, by definition, a collaborative environment which provides engagement and a strong “sense of presence,” fostering socialization among learners considered critical to success in distance...