Lessons from the Virtual Campus: The Life and Death of a Second Life University

Kathryn E. Stevens, Madison Art Collection, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA
Scott P. Stevens, Department of Computer Information Systems and Business Analytics, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA

ABSTRACT

Second Life is a virtual world where many universities have established an educational presence. Hoping to serve as a useful example for others that are considering the creation of a virtual campus, this article follows how the Second Life campus of James Madison University was created in 2008. It details the nontraditional ways that it was used by faculty and students for museum studies, student projects, and in-world conferencing. It also reviews the major reasons why the project failed in April 2012 after four years of successful use, concluding with thoughts on best practices for Second Life university campuses.

Keywords: Avatar, Collaborative Learning, Educational Conferencing, Museum Studies, Second Life, Virtual Worlds

WHY VIRTUAL WORLDS IN EDUCATION?

Second Life is a virtual world that has flourished since it first came online in 2003. Created and owned by Linden Lab it was originally based in San Francisco, California in the United States. Although it is used internationally, it retains a distinctive American flavor as evidenced by the in-world clock that is set to Pacific Standard Time. Like all virtual worlds Second Life depends upon the interaction of an avatar for a user, known as a resident, to interface with the digital world. While Second Life generally has about 70,000 users in-world at any given time, it shares little with Massively Online Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs, as it is not a game. Rather Second Life is a world where its users choose how to socially interact with each other. Indeed, from its inception what distinguishes this virtual world from other similar platforms is the extent of user interaction.1

Many virtual worlds, such as The Sims™, give users a choice of pre-generated avatar and environmental choices and have been studied for educational uses (see Active Worlds, Dickey,
Like these other virtual worlds, Second Life does have “starter” avatars that new users select from and log into the virtual world with for the first time, but from that point forward users quickly customize their digital selves. The single most powerful feature of Second Life is the extent to which the users, known as residents, create this virtual world. Residents search out and choose destinations that interest them. The avatars that they meet, the shops that they frequent, the experiences that they have, shape this virtual extension of the resident. Most active users of Second Life can easily identify a new resident, but after only a few hours of active participation, these new residents typically develop a distinctive look and character. This degree of customization does not end with the avatar but permeates throughout the entire fabric of Second Life. Residents import textures that are used to generate buildings and objects, they create scripts and animations that allow interactions with those creations and others, and if they own or rent virtual real estate, they can shape and texture the land itself.

This ability to customize one’s self and environment makes Second Life uniquely suited to educational uses of virtual worlds. While Linden Lab maintained a fifty-percent discount for non-profit organizations, Second Life was filled with artistic co-operatives, charity fundraisers, museums, and universities. All of these entities were eager to reach new audiences and effectively used the virtual world to impose their brand upon the malleable fabric of Second Life. For the real power of Second Life, the creative ability, is not restricted to the talented few but open to anyone willing to spend a few hours either educating themselves on the mechanics of the world or participating in one of the numerous free workshops and tutorials available in-world. Unlike many other virtual environments that provide the user with a complete world to interact in, Linden Lab has created less than one percent of all objects found in Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008). With very little financial investment, non-profits could establish a presence in Second Life that resembled their physical one, but which could be used by a world audience at any time.

The virtual world of Second Life is attractive for universities looking to expand their long-distance learning programs as well as those that want to include non-traditional students in campus life and identity. Many educational organizations, as chronicled by De Lucia, Francese, Passero, and Tortora (2009), recreate their real campuses in the virtual world to study the effectiveness of education in a virtual environment. Some go further; Vassar College combines recreations of its principal real-life college buildings with the Sistine Chapel from Italy and the purely virtual Castle Vassar. The virtual world also allows the creation of educational experiences that could not be easily generated in the real world. The Exploratorium Science Museum in San Francisco, for example, created a simulation of a meteor impact on Mars that remains particularly memorable.²

Because Second Life is such an easy virtual world in which to recreate an organizational identity and to tailor the environment to specific purposes, educators have been interested in exploring its possible uses (Warburton, 2009). As an international virtual world it has been used to explore how it can educationally augment the study of fields such as archaeology (Edirisingha, Nie, Pluciennik, & Young, 2009), communications (Jarman, Traphagen, & Mayrath, 2008), computer science (Esteves, Fonseca, Morgado, & Martins, 2009), health education (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007), and operations management (Lee & Wheeler, 2007). Second Life has a free market economy with a real-world GNP of $64 million as of 2005, making it an interesting laboratory for economic and business studies (Newitz, 2006). Additionally Second Life has been considered for use in the interactive learning style that involves participants assuming specific roles in a given