Uses of Second Life in Higher Education: Three Successful Cases

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Abstract

Second Life is a 3-dimensional world built by Linden Labs intended on revolutionizing distance correspondence, learning, and interactivity online. Both educators and corporations alike recently have been establishing a presence in order to attract new students, facilitate distance education, or maintain relationships across oceans, time, and language barriers. This paper seeks to evaluate how educators in particular are using Second Life, and observes the successes and shortcomings they have experienced through their explorations in the Second Life “metaverse.”
Introduction

In 2003, Linden Labs, a San Francisco-based company, introduced a 3-D virtual world called Second Life to the public. Since then, Second Life has been attempting to change the way internet users interact and correspond with one another over the World Wide Web. In Second Life, users establish a virtual presence by creating avatars, or virtual representations of themselves, which can travel to different “islands” in this 3-D world (also known as a “metaverse”). Islands are designed and built by Second Life inhabitants for a nominal fee. Contents of an island can range from entertaining to informative, allowing visitors to experience opportunities which are not necessarily available to them in real life. For example, on an island created by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Second Life inhabitants can experience (and live through) a virtual tsunami simulation. At the Virtual Van Gogh museum designed and developed by Tressis Virtual Worlds, visitors can walk though an open-air museum and view all of Van Gogh’s works, several of which are located at different locations throughout the world. Tressis also rendered many pieces of Van Gogh’s work into 3-D rooms and objects, essentially bringing his paintings to life and giving visitors the opportunity to “walk-through” a Van Gogh painting.

Today, several institutions in higher education have recently been establishing their own presence in this virtual 3-D world in order to explore the possibilities of stimulate different forms of learning. This paper evaluates how three different universities have found success in using Second Life for recruiting prospective students, living out real world scenarios without the real world costs and risks, and encouraging students to experiment with Second Life and conduct research with participants.
Case 1: Case Western Reserve University’s Virtual Campus Tour

Since its introduction to the public in 2003, several universities have invested in Second Life projects to explore the advantages of a virtual presence in a 3-D world that is accessible to a wide multi-national audience. One such institution is Case Western Reserve University. Case Western spent approximately $30,000 to construct a virtual campus in Second Life for the purpose of attracting prospective students who were unable to attend a campus tour in-person. The virtual replica contained several buildings from the actual campus, including a dormitory whose windows show ideal views of the campus’ athletics fields, which is a feature of a real building also promoted during in-person tours as well. Another advantage of the virtual campus that Case Western admissions officials also were fond of was the ability for prospective students to interact and converse with current students during times where admissions officials were not always present (Young, 2007, p. A29). This enabled prospective students to feel comfortable having questions addressed that they would not normally pose to campus officials.

Was Case Western Reserve University able to turn traffic to the virtual campus by prospective students into applications to the real university? Jonathan Werner, associate director of undergraduate admissions at Case Western, stated that approximately 40 students made a virtual visit during the virtual campus’ lifespan in Second Life (Young, 2007, p. A29).

Case 2: State University of New York at Oneonta’s “Homeless Professor”

Harry E. Pence, Professor of Chemistry at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oneonta, began reading about the virtual world known as Second Life in 2006 and began exploring the educational possibilities that the metaverse offered. Pence joined Second Life in November 2006 without the support of campus administration, thus taking on the persona of a
“homeless professor.” He spent the first few months conversing with many of Second Life’s inhabitants regarding instructional technology and learning to teach in a virtual space before being asked by the Director of Second Life Alliance Library Consortium to become the manager of the Pantheon Concert Hall. Having access to such a venue in the virtual world made it feasible to the professor to involve students from the Music program at SUNY Oneonta. SUNY Oneonta is largely known for its popularity among students interested in Music as a major course of study. Nine volunteer students participated in an extra credit internship program in Second Life organized by the homeless professor. The nine students were divided into three groups of three. Each group was required to organize a concert enlisting established Second Life performers. The students were responsible for the publicity, technical requirements, and working with the performers to ensure each concert went smoothly, just as they would in real life. The only differences between organizing a virtual performance and a real life performance were the risks involved and monetary requirements.

Ultimately, the outcome was a complete success. The students managed to work together and put on a concert in the Pantheon Concert Hall in Second Life and projected through a large screen television. The concert was attended by over 100 SUNY Oneonta students, most of whom were new to Second Life. The student interns were able to demonstrate what they learned and determined that their experiences organizing the virtual concert would be useful in their future careers.

Case 3: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) uses Second Life as a Student Lab

Most college campuses in Second Life mirror their real-life counterparts. However, only a quarter of the Second Life version of MIT’s campus looks like the actual campus. The rest of
MIT’s virtual campus is devoted entirely to student projects. In this way, MIT enforces collaboration with its students and encourages exploration into the virtual world. In one part of the island, students can address a crowd of students from a platform through a megaphone. Any avatar within earshot would be able to hear the speeches. As the speaker talks, the students can move to the left or right of a line that divides the platform in order to show their agreement or disagreement with the speaker’s point of view. This platform was designed by Drew Harry, a graduate student at MIT who has been studying how virtual environments can help consensus building (Foster, 2007, p. A26).

In the part of the island that resembles the real MIT campus, there are a set of three-dimensional residence halls. MIT uses the virtual representation of these dormitories to help prospective students determined which halls would be the best fit for them.

Criticisms

Second Life is not without its criticisms. First, the technical requirements to use Second Life are typically beyond the capabilities of most computing labs on college campuses. In particular, since Second Life is a 3-D virtual world, a powerful graphics card is needed to render the environment of the islands that people visit. Even with a decent graphics card however, rendering of the buildings and features of an island still takes minutes to complete and demands the patience of the visitor to wait until the process has finished before being able to explore the grounds. Unless users are privileged enough to have the proper technical support or financial backing, they will be unable to participate in Second Life activities (Livingstone, 2007, p. 15).

Second, Second Life does not accommodate for users with disabilities such as visual or mobility impairments. Although Second Life includes a chat feature, it is still inaccessible, as it
does not work with any speech recognition program (Livingstone, 2007, p. 15). If educators choose to use Second Life as the primary medium for distance learning courses and/or student collaboration, they must ensure that students with special needs are addressed and that accessible forms of communication and learning are available to them.

Third, there is a large amount of unregulated sexual content that can be found on Second Life. People inadvertently stumble upon material that they had no intention of finding, which can hurt the experience of visitors who seek to benefit from the educational aspects of Second Life. In May 2006, Linden Labs acknowledged that assault and harassment are two of the most common violations in the online world (Bugeja, 2007, p. C2). So the question becomes, who is responsible for exposing students to an online world riddled with inappropriate material, when their experience for learning could be undermined by the possibility of stumbling upon something unwanted and unexpected? Based on its terms of service, Linden Labs states that it “has limited control, if any, over the quality, safety, morality, legality, truthfulness, or accuracy of various aspects of the Service.” This implies that the responsibility belongs to the educators who recommend using Second Life as a resource for education.

Conclusion

Use of Second Life in higher education has limitless possibilities. While most institutions tend to replicate their campuses in the virtual world, other universities expand upon this idea and allow students to participate in exploring the educational benefits of Second Life. MIT for example, devotes three-quarters of its virtual campus to students, giving them the opportunity to design and develop their own projects for research. At SUNY Oneonta, Professor Harry Pence introduced Second Life to his colleagues by overseeing an internship for nine
students in the Music program, having them organize concerts held virtually in Second Life.
These students experienced real-life issues regarding scheduling, compensation, and contracting;
all of which they would also be responsible for if they were to organize a concert in real life.

As with all new technologies and concepts, critics oppose Second Life due to its
extensive hardware demands, lack of accessibility support for users and students with
disabilities, and its lack of responsibility for regulating inappropriate content and conduct among
its user community, just to name a few. However, at the rate that technology is advancing,
Linden Labs’ Second Life is at the forefront for revolutionizing the way Internet users
communicate, interact, and collaborate with one another over the web. The hardware
requirements needed to successfully run the Second Life client will soon be a standard on all
desktop and laptop machines. As for accessibility issues, Linden Labs continues to work on
improvements to its Second Life virtual world, releasing patches and hot fixes on a regular basis.
Linden Labs promises to move towards a more flexible platform and interface in the future
(Livingstone, 2007, p. 15).
References


