

Second Life for Learning: From virtual worlds to augmented classrooms, laboratories and field trips.

Virtual Learning spaces offer the best of all worlds by promising an immersive sensory experience, gameplay, social environments and sense of place. Because of the rich offerings, much hope has been pinned to the potential of environments like Second Life. While the entire experience is compelling, identifying and studying the effective features of this environment may permit the transfer of these device to more traditional environments.

What types of symbols, representations of people and / or interactions provoke the greatest responses? Are we able to identify and build up on the relationships observed in virtual learning environments?

By exploring the most effective spaces, interactions and experiences in Second Life, we hope to identify potential enhancements to improve learning experiences in traditional spaces including classrooms, laboratories, field trips and learning management systems.

Second Life and the ability to do anything....

The phenomenon of virtual worlds has enjoyed an renewed heyday with the recent popularity of Second Life. The dreams of creating virtual spaces to rival physical spaces has gone through a series of iterations with each new environment inspiring the creation of a new ambitious project. Second Life has spawned its own iterations. For better or worse, many of the virtual spaces created are modeled on existing real spaces. Great effort is put into replicating the look and feel, spaces and textures of real places. For those spots with great cultural and historical significance, such as the simulated city of Dublin built in Second Life, the effort may have obvious benefits. For places that are less recognizable, the value is less obvious. Furthermore, given the ability to create a space free from the constraints of physical laws, possibilities for features of completely new spaces are great. Interestingly, the design of virtual spaces appears to be guided by the constraints of the real world.

High Value on Creation

Residents are encouraged to create their own content within Second Life. Not only are the tools for creation embedded within the 'play' in the virtual world, there is considerable impetus for citizens to create. Generous intellectual property rules grant individuals the right to own, sell or

freely distribute their creations. This has given rise to a virtual economy within the environment. Creators of popular items are able to earn currency that can be converted into US dollars. In addition, lessons on creating items in Second Life are freely available to residents.

These incentives have resulted in an environment where large numbers create anything they want. A burgeoning economy has arisen, complete with craftspeople, builders and brokers. All manner of items ranging from jewelery, furniture and even houses and buildings can be purchased or commissioned.

This pool of skilled artisans has been particularly useful in assisting institutional entrance into this virtual world. Many schools have created online presences in Second Life. This presence can vary. Some schools have put their landmarks into the space while others have tried to recreate several of their buildings. Others have created spaces that aggregate landmarks from several institutions.

Creating spaces that are better than real life

An exploration of types of spaces and their effectiveness as learning environments is overdue. In a place with no physical constraints, does it make sense to create the same learning environments that we currently have in real life? Are there features that could be incorporated that would be physically impossible to include in real life?

How should different types of learning activities shape different types of virtual learning spaces. Are the spaces required for lectures useful for Problem Based Learning? What should a teaching laboratory look like? Is it possible to create environments for field trips.

Join us as we explore the impact of creating and using learning spaces in Second Life.