

By Anders Gronstedt

SECOND LIFE

The 3-D web world is slowly becoming part of the training industry.

Produces Real Training Results

The Internet spawns a new phenomenon almost daily, and another concept, Second Life, is transforming training and education. A three-dimensional web platform, Second Life blends graphics, gaming elements, chat rooms, and online commerce into a single platform. The site—www.secondlife.com—allows users to create their own alter ego or “avatar.”

Second Life isn't the standard two-dimensional web. It is web 3-D. It's mesmerizing, immersive, and inherently social, but it's also perplexing and intimidating, clunky, and occasionally slow.

And it's all the rage in the training sector. IBM is investing millions of dollars in the 3-D Internet virtual world and other spaces, including some 25 “islands” in Second Life. IBM is not alone. An increasing number of corporate heavy hitters like Sun, Dell, British Petroleum, and Intel are transferring their training programs to Second Life's virtual “metaverse.”

Hundreds of colleges and universities are already teaching classes in Second Life. Scores of universities have entire campuses in the virtual world, and Harvard is teaching classes in the space for credit. Clearly, many of the world's largest organizations believe that Second Life is going to be a big part of their futures.

Exploring Second Life

Second Life is the fastest growing online community on the web. According to research by the Gartner Group, 80 percent of active Internet users will be participating in nongaming virtual worlds, such as Second Life, by the end of 2011.

The best way to fully understand the appeal and potential of this strange, intriguing digital world is to explore it for yourself. Open a free account, then download the client software and create your “avatar,” a virtual image that represents you online.

Once you've decided whether to be Superman, Wonder Woman, Darth Vader, a vampire, dragon, pink flamingo, or simply a stylized version of the real you, you're ready to begin roaming around the fantastically detailed landscape. You can abandon traditional notions about the limitations of space and gravity. If you're tired of walking, you can enter a command and fly to your destination. If flying gets old, teleporting gets you there instantaneously.

Users can make friends, race cars, fly airplanes, hold meetings, exchange ideas, engage in combat, attend live concerts, buy and sell both real and virtual products and services, and much more.

Communicating and interacting

When residents of Second Life approach you for a friendly chat, you'll see their hands typing in the air. A text message appears on the screen when one user contacts another. These conversations are public so they can be seen by anyone in the vicinity. If you want to communicate privately with another avatar, you should use the instant messaging option. As you make new friends, you can add them to your "friends list" and keep track of where they are and when they're online.

Some people actually make a living in Second Life. They manufacture and sell clothes, trade lakefront properties, and work as a bouncers at dance clubs. The creator of Second Life, San Francisco-based Linden Lab, makes most of its money selling "land." The site's currency, Linden dollars, can be

exchanged at a rate that fluctuates at around Linden \$270 to \$1 in the United States. You can buy your own piece of real estate for anywhere from Linden \$200 to \$1,500 for an entire island.

Second Life is an American innovation, but its user base is international. Data from ComScore, an Internet marketing research company, shows that 60 percent of Second Life's users are in Europe. Only 16 percent are from the United States, and 13 percent hail from Asia. In fact, Second Life users in Germany outnumber American users.

"We get the greatest rates in Brazil, India, and China," says Chuck Hamilton, director of the IBM@Play program at IBM's Center for Advanced Learning, which is part of the company's Second Life learning investment.

Many international residents communicate in English, but there's a lot of chatter in local languages. A feature called Babblar provides





on-the-fly translations of conversations. It's far from perfect, but it is effective enough to help you get the gist of most conversations.

Second Life can be a playground or a business adjunct, a social networking hub, or a programming haven. These multiple uses help explain the diverse subscriber base, which is 60 percent men and 40 percent women whose average age ranges in the 30s. Twenty percent of female avatars are actually operated by male users; almost all male avatars are run by men. Users must be at least 18 years old. A similarly constructed Second Life grid exists for teens.

Training for hard skills

Second Life is different from gaming environments because nearly everything you see is created by the site's users. Residents use 3-D modeling language to build houses, trees, streets, and furniture. These tools also can be used by training professionals to illustrate technical concepts in powerful new ways.

"One of the advantages of Second Life is that you can manipulate the sense of scale and perspective," says IBM's Hamilton. "You can crawl around a big oil rig or fly around a network diagram."

Paul Steinberg, project manager at Intel Software Solutions Group, finds these modeling capabilities useful for various skills training programs.

"We can miniaturize large systems such as our digital health solutions with remote access," he says, "or blow up a computer chip."


Flying your avatar inside a molecule at the science library in Second Life, for instance, gives you a novel view of the placement of carbon atoms in three-dimensional space. Another Second Life museum, Exploratorium, has built a scale model of the earth-moon system. Even astronomers have found that walking their avatars from Earth to the moon gives them a more immediate understanding of the sizes and distances involved.

Killing videoconferencing?

Second Life is ultimately a social networking tool that takes online interaction and collaboration to unprecedented levels, breaks down hierarchies, and eliminates geographic boundaries. IBM employees practice interviewing techniques in front of an audience that will later critique them. Another popular application at IBM are language classes. Second Life also is replacing many of the company's videoconferencing and webinar activities.

"Seeing a talking head on a computer screen doesn't add much value, but in Second Life you can chat, make gestures, and interact in 3-D," explains Hamilton.

IBM frequently holds meetings that involve real participants in a confer-



ence room interacting with the avatars of remote participants being displayed on a screen.

“People have real conversations, they pull stuff out of their inventory to illustrate concepts—it’s learner driven rather than teacher driven,” says Rodica Buzescu, project manager at Millions of Us, which helps businesses market themselves on Second Life.

The real breakthrough for Second Life as a learning application is the full integration of voice capability. Instead of having to rely on instant messaging and chat, users can now speak to each other via voice in 3-D. The voices of nearby avatars sound louder than avatars that are farther away, and voice from avatars to your right feed through the right speaker.

Creating virtual identities

One of the unique attributes of Second Life is what IBM’s Hamilton calls the “sense of self.” With nearly 10 Second Life learning projects under his belt, he and his team have concluded that many of IBM’s 4,000 employees invest much time and effort to express their identities—body shape, dress, and gestures—by customizing their avatars.

“You get to know something about them based on their skin colors, their looks, and their species,” says Hamilton. “Their appearances speak volumes about who they are. It works as a great icebreaker.”

Most companies have either written or informal dress codes, but not in Second Life. “We never gave guidelines. We never told employees that they can’t come as a fish,” continues Hamilton, who frequently sports a kilt in Second Life as a proud expression of his Scottish heritage.

Intel Software Solutions Group’s Steinberg recognizes that all employees don’t have the inclination to shop around for a unique appearance.

“We’ve created some standard avatars that people can slip on if they don’t want to create their own.”

Replicating classroom learning

Second Life is creating more virtual classrooms. Unfortunately, most e-learning still looks like a classroom lecture. It takes time for a new medium to develop its own character and unique vernacular.

There are signs that some learning organizations are pushing the envelope. IBM has balloons flying in the air that you can enter to explore 360-degree images—a virtual reality within the virtual reality. A University of California psychology class provides students with the experience of powerful virtual hallucinations. As you get closer to a poster on the wall, words on it change to profanities and an ominous voice tells you to “kill yourself.” This experience illustrates schizophrenia in ways that listening to



a lecture or reading a text simply can't match. These creative applications suggest a need to reinvent learning in Second Life.

"We don't want to shovel thousands of whitepapers," says Intel's Steinberg. "We point employees to websites where they can find that. In Second Life you can meet software engineers you would never have a chance to chat with normally, fly around 3-D models you could never replicate in a classroom, or play a robot war for kicks."

Training barriers

There remain various barriers to widespread adoption of Second Life in corporate training. First of all, it's primarily a consumer application. Don't try to schedule a meeting on Wednesday morning, for instance. That's a time when Linden Lab frequently shuts down the site for maintenance with only a few hours' notice.

There also are firewall issues. "Second Life is not developed for a corporate environment," says Intel's Steinberg. "We have interim solutions in place to get it behind our firewall." Some companies see security risks as well. Islands can be private, with restricted access for the public, but Steinberg says he doesn't trust the website's security. However, Linden Lab announced that it will boost security against hackers and allow companies to host their virtual worlds on their own servers.

Hardware and infrastructure requirements pose another barrier. The amount of data driven by Second Life's virtual environment can tax even high-speed Internet connections, and the addition of voice is only going to increase the drain.

"You certainly need a good processor, a good graphic card, and good bandwidth," says Laura Thomas, who runs Dell's Second Life training.

Second Life's main challenge, however, isn't technology, but people. "The knee-jerk reaction to a lot of people is that they have too much work with their first lives to start a second one," says Thomas. This also is the reason why Dell is starting small with a simple speaker series.

Intel is taking an evolutionary approach as well. "We're starting low key," says Steinberg. "We're trying to really understand how we can develop a community in Second Life and strengthen our existing real-life community."

Several companies are setting up their own orientation islands to familiarize employees with the virtual world. "What I like about IBM's orientation island is that it not only teaches how to walk and fly, it also gives an understanding of intellectual property issues in Second Life," says George Widmeyer, information systems professor at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

"We can't curb their enthusiasm," says IBM's Hamilton about his employees' response.

“Second Life excels at synchronous training,” says Widmeyer, “but you still need a website, a wiki, a threaded discussion group, and a blog. Second Life is not a good information repository.”

Building on Web 2.0

Second Life is only the latest step in the democratization of learning.

“Our Second Life engagement builds on our existing Web 2.0 activities with blogs and wikis,” says Steinberg, who describes the move as a sea change for Intel. “We’re embracing chaos and uncertainty. If things go wrong they have to be tweaked in real time in the public eye. That’s just part of embracing the mindset of Web 2.0. This viral platform points to the direction of the future.”

Yet he prefers to do it in front of today’s seven million users instead of waiting a couple of years when the company might be operating on a 100 million user stage.

Virtual worlds provide learning organizations with a powerful, unique ability to engage and empower employees in ways that accommodate their digital and mobile lifestyles, adapt to their individual learning needs, and encourage collaboration. While it’s currently the dominant platform, Second Life is just one among a growing number of virtual worlds. Competitors include Active World, There, and Entropia Universe. Even if Second Life doesn’t become the standard for 3-D worlds, the trend toward web 3-D seems irreversible. **T+D**

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Learning applications in Second Life

What are the primary learning applications in Second Life? Here are a few candidates:

- **Hard skills.** Create 3-D models that participants can fly around or walk inside.
- **Soft skills.** Role-play a job interview or sales call, or meet a subject matter expert.
- **Simulation.** Cultivate business acumen by running a virtual business or learn about schizophrenia by experiencing powerful hallucinations.
- **Meetings.** Talk via voice or instant message; gesture, show objects, or go for a walk. Second Life will save us from the conference call doldrums.



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