

Be First in Second Life



Virtual worlds succeed where the “flatland” applications fail: They engage learners. By Anders Gronstedt

I don't usually strike up conversations with robots. But here I was, facilitating a training session with a mean-looking mechanical creature. The human behind the robot was Joe Miller, VP of platform & technology development at Linden Lab, the creator of virtual world Second Life. He spoke to a group of 40 senior learning professionals at Gronstedt Group's weekly “Train for Success” meeting in Second Life. The robot is Miller's “avatar,” his cyber-self, in Second Life. The audience came from four continents to the standing-room only event. Fortunately, avatars don't get tired of standing.

After a few minutes in a Second Life meeting, you'll see why this virtual world is heralded as the most disruptive technology of our age. It is an immersive environment that keeps participants focused and motivated on topics and tasks at hand. It is Internet in 3-D. And it takes interaction and collaboration to unprecedented levels. The crowd is typing throughout the hour, their questions and side conversations appearing on the screen. Voices are heard in 3-D. If you're standing to the right of the speaker with your avatar, you'll hear him from the right speaker of your headset.

Contrast this experience with your average conference call or Webinar. Staring at a phone or a static PowerPoint slide while listening to disembodied voices, most learners start checking their e-mail after only a few minutes. Virtual worlds succeed where the “flatland” applications fail: They engage. In the immersive experience of a virtual world, you suspend belief and identify with the avatar on the screen. The avatar is the product of your self-expression. Chuck Hamilton, learning and new media leader for IBM's 3-D Internet team, said at one of our weekly Train for Success meetings: “At IBM, you can come to the meeting as a fish.” That might seem frivolous, but with low productivity caused by disengaged workers at a cost to the U.S. economy of approximately \$300 billion a year,

it's time to shift attention to approaches that not only transfer knowledge, but actually engage learners.

Steve Prentice, fellow of Gartner Group, estimates that 80 percent of active Internet users will be in non-gaming virtual worlds such as Second Life by the end of 2011. “Whenever an organization comes to me and asks, ‘Where do we start?’ training is always the first application I suggest,” said Prentice at a recent keynote at Vbusiness Expo.

There's no question that virtual worlds are reinventing learning. Hundreds of universities, including Harvard and INSEAD, teach classes in Second Life for credit. Some 15,000 IBM employees are in virtual worlds. Hundreds of new IBM employees are entering the ranks of avatars every week. There's a growing consensus among technology leaders such as Cisco and IBM that the 3-D Web is a more powerful force than the Internet. “Ironically,” says Professor Tony O'Driscoll, “virtual worlds are squarely aimed at disrupting and reinventing the one institution that hasn't changed in centuries: learning.”

There's only one way to understand virtual worlds: by taking the plunge and creating your own avatar. Visit www.secondlife.com to sign up for a free account, download the client software, and create your own virtual alter-ego. Next, head to a meeting. The Thursday Train for Success meeting is a good start. Just type “Train for Success” in the search box when you're “in world.” Get there 10 minutes early as it's been filled to capacity almost every week lately. Grab a cup of virtual coffee, chat with peers, and meet expert speakers from Cisco, Sun Microsystems, IBM, and more. After your first meeting, you'll realize how the playbook of training has changed forever.

Anders Gronstedt, Ph.D. (anders@gronstedtgroup.com), aka “Anders Wildcat” in Second Life, is president of the Gronstedt Group, which helps companies such as Dell, Jamba Juice, Volvo Cars, and Ericsson improve sales and workplace performance in Second and Real Life.