

Exploring the potential of virtual worlds for teaching and learning

By Kathryn Trinder

What is it about 3D Virtual Worlds that have captured our interest so much? The educational community seems all a-buzz with these things, possibly more so than any technology we've encountered before.

VWs, such as Second Life, are not just **one** technology - they are infinite yet initially empty spaces, provided with tool kits full of developing & evolving technologies that can make up an entire world, bulging with possibilities as yet unexplored. Or at least they can be if, we are told, we have the imagination...

But Second Life, for example, was not **built** as an educational environment as such, and this brings with it its own problems, as well as its massive potential.

"This is a bit odd. I'm not sure I like it" (lecturer, reporting a student comment)

There have been discussions elsewhere (in the literature, at conferences and in many online communities^{1 2 3 4 5}), about issues and problems of these technologies, such as their unstable nature, support and training, but we should bear in mind that these worlds are **new**. Technologies rarely appear as ready, stable, end of production entities. They evolve, and part of that evolution is not only about ironing out the bugs, but also about tweaking or redeveloping as the users make demands and requests, and as user expectations are uncovered and thinking changes.

Over the last year we have already seen many issues resolved, and as a community we are already influencing that evolution and ongoing development. If we let developers & support & even, managers, know what **we** require then we have endless opportunities to influence - for example as we have been doing for many years with the internet and our learning management systems.

This conference though is not about our dissatisfactions with the technology...Instead it is more productive for us as educators to concentrate on what we can **do** with the technology. However - do we know yet what we want? Do we yet know what we **can** do?

"...explaining to the students that whole point of Second Life is that there isn't necessarily a point to it, it's about what you are doing there that is significant." (Law lecturer)

1 <http://virtualworldwatch.net/snapshots/>

2 Relive08: <http://www.open.ac.uk/relive08/>

3 The many VW related strands of ALT-C09: <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2009/timetable.html>

4 Example blog post + comments: <http://tinyurl.com/yfx2dz>

5 Virtual Worlds for academic, organizational, and life-long learning (ViWo 2009 Workshop)
<http://www.iicm.tugraz.at/ViWo/ViWo2009Workshop>

"We wanted to look at skills we could do in Second Life that we can't do in the actual skills lab" ⁶ (Senior lecturer)

Over the last couple of years Glasgow Caledonian University, like many others ^{7 8}, have been exploring, developing, and teaching in the 3D virtual world "Second Life", as you will see from this presentation and mix of video conversations, with teachers & staff at GCU, about their work in SL.

I believe there is still much exploration to be done and that we should delight in this exploration. We have the opportunity to help develop these technologies for our own, and more importantly, our learners' needs.

"...a couple of students said that after maybe about 5 or 10 minutes they actually forgot they were in Second Life..." (Nursing lecturer)

So, what is it about 3D Virtual Worlds that have captured our interest so much?

Questions for delegate discussion (and hopefully some delegate-suggested answers!) during the presentation may include:

* Have we, perhaps, been conned by the speed of 'change' on the Internet into rushing to judgement about the role of new platforms? How much do we, or can we, really understand at this point about using such platforms in a learning context without further exploration?

* Should we avoid repeating what we already do in the physical world and only embrace pedagogies that go beyond our traditional models? Or is there still a place for us to mirror our old practices in these new environments?

* Can we, or how can we, extend the use of VWs to better support our students who, we are told, increasingly reside online?

"We expected to have difficulties with students being unfamiliar with Second Life, so we thought at the beginning they may not even be able to operate the scenario." (Computing lecturer) ⁹

6 [GCU School of Health – Second Life: http://caledonianblogs.net/soh-secondlife/](http://caledonianblogs.net/soh-secondlife/)

7 <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/habitatfinalreport.aspx>

8 <http://virtualworldwatch.net/snapshots/>

9 <http://www.iicm.tugraz.at/ViWo/ViWo2009Workshop>