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Time for another life? *Creating real benefits from a virtual world*

The first time you visit Second Life might feel like you've tumbled down the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland. It is a peculiar but life-like virtual world on the internet where you are free to wander, or even fly, around the endless tropical landscapes to meet and chat to other 'avatars'. Many people are quick to dismiss Second Life as another fad for today's younger generations. But having worked closely with St Dunstan's College, a forward-thinking independent school in South East London, we believe Second Life has unique educational potential that is worth embracing.

Second Life was launched to the public in 2003. It has grown exponentially since then and now has a resident population of 12 million and a thriving economy of its own. Its currency, Linden dollars, has established its own exchange rate with the real world and more than \$5 million worth of transactions in real US dollars are conducted each month.

Second Life is no longer the domain of geeks. Well-known organisations have set up a presence in Second Life such as Adidas and Vodafone. Well-respected, non-commercial outfits including the BBC, Save the Children charity and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) are also present, alongside many smaller, lesser known companies and millions of individuals.

Visiting Second Life is simple – all you need to do is get an 'avatar' (your virtual body) and some software, both of which are free from Second Life website (www.secondlife.com). You are given an online tutorial that shows you how to walk, fly, touch, speak, and so on, using your keyboard and mouse. If you get really hooked you can become a member for a small fee, buy land, create virtual homes and conduct real business.

There are two aspects that are fundamental to the success of Second Life:

1. Although the technology is cutting edge, it is readily accessible and easy to use. There are not the barriers that some technologies can create.
2. It is a highly engaging visual environment that appeals to young people who, through their experience of gaming, find interacting in a virtual world second nature.

What has all this to do with education and where is the potential?

The most obvious application of Second Life for schools is as a marketing tool. Paul Glyne-Thomas, head of ICT at St Dunstan's College, says: "Our virtual school will enable prospective parents and interested parties to get a feel for the personality of this establishment – some people may not be able to visit us in person and this will help them understand what we are about. We are excited at the prospect of being able to use Second Life as a three-dimensional show case of all the wonderful things we are doing. It blows a paper prospectus out of the water!"

Second Life also offers great potential in teaching the curriculum and supporting personalised learning. One of its greatest assets is the ability to recreate objects and environments that are difficult or prohibitively expensive in the real world. So for example, one could create a chemistry laboratory where teachers and pupils can carry out experiments that they cannot perform in the real world either because of health and safety regulations or because the equipment is too expensive. Those responsible for leadership training could set team building challenges such as constructing a raft to cross a river in a virtual environment so that pupils of all ages could learn from the experience without risk.

Paul Glyne-Thomas comments: "Although we are still at the planning stages, we can already envisage how Second Life will be able to significantly expand the realms of what we can teach our pupils."

There are also exciting learning opportunities for languages in Second Life. For example a French department could create a boulangerie or café with a quintessential French atmosphere and then restrict all conversations to French within this area. Pupils can speak to each other using headphones and voice over IP technology or 'chat' by typing to each other. There is, of course, the opportunity to share the space with overseas schools so pupils from different countries can have an enjoyable place to meet and practice their language skills.

Second Life is the perfect medium for bringing people together and could be the ideal setting for collaborative projects between schools. Harvard Law School, for example, regularly opens its doors to outsiders through its live debates and panel discussions in Second Life. There is something special about collaborating in Second Life – perhaps because your avatar gives you a very real feeling of presence that is unattainable in other forms of online communication technologies.

Another form of collaboration or partnership could involve schools sharing their Second Life facilities. Although getting an avatar is free, there is cost involved in buying virtual land, building schools and equipment. It is not hard to imagine an independent school, for example, providing access to its virtual chemistry laboratories to the local comprehensive school. With increased pressure for private schools to prove 'public benefit', Second Life could become the modern equivalent of letting out the school swimming pool.

With older pupils, Second Life could help develop business acumen. Unlike in any other virtual world, residents own their own creations, so they can buy and sell them freely with Linden dollars that are readily converted into real money. Not only does Second Life operate its own economy but we believe the opportunities for entrepreneurs are significant – this is virgin territory for commerce after all.

St Dunstan's College and VLE Support are keen to work with the Social Entrepreneur Project (<http://sep.hopehiv.org>). This organisation encourages children to find creative and resourceful ways of making money, having been given a little seed capital. All of the profit generated is donated to HOPEHIV, an international charity working with children who have been orphaned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. In the past children have made and sold cakes or provided a car valet service outside the local supermarket to raise the money. St Dunstan's College, however, is interested in using Second Life as the medium through which some of its pupils set up their businesses to raise money for HOPEHIV.

Every decade or so a new technology comes along that is so useful and different that it completely changes the way that we do something: air travel, personal computers, mobile phones and the internet to name a few. Management experts call them 'disruptive technologies' and virtual worlds, particularly Second Life, have been hailed by some as the next one.

Second Life is in its infancy, and so it is still a little rough around the edges. But younger generations, in particular, are very much at home in this virtual environment. It is the older generations that need to catch up and embrace the inevitable. The applications of Second Life to education that we've described above are just the tip of the iceberg. It is now a case of freeing imaginations and then identifying which, of the myriad of possibilities, will benefit pupils most.

Mark Trinick is managing director of VLE Support. For more information on Second Life or virtual learning environments visit www.vlesupport.co.uk or call 0845 638 4328