

SECON THAT

By Pat Galagan

JOE MILLER WILL PRESENT A KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE ASTD TECHKNOWLEDGE CONFERENCE IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS ON FEBRUARY 27, 2008. HE WILL DEMONSTRATE HOW SECOND LIFE IS BEING USED NOW, WHAT'S WORKING, WHAT ISN'T, AND PROVIDE A GLIMPSE OF ITS POSSIBILITIES FOR LEARNING AND OTHER KINDS OF EXPERIENCES. TO REGISTER, VISIT WWW.TK08.ASTD.ORG/.



SECOND[®]
LIFE

COULD SECOND LIFE BE LEARNING'S SECOND CHANCE?

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What has six times the area of New York City, its own ballet, and a replica of the Sistine Chapel but doesn't take up any real space? Second Life, a digital chimera that is visited by millions of people daily, is a virtual world where almost anything can happen, including new ways to learn and engage people in the extended workplace.

To experience a Second Life learning adventure, enter the site and go to Vassar College's recreation of the Sistine Chapel. If you've visited the real one in Vatican City, you know that it's always crammed full of chattering tourists and that the beautiful Michelangelo frescos are high up on the walls and ceiling where you can't really see them in the gloom.

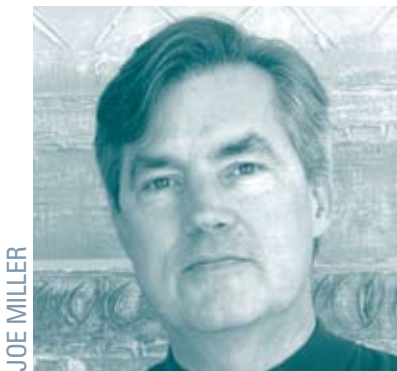
But in the Second Life Sistine Chapel you, in the form of your avatar, can fly (yes, fly) up to the ceiling for a close look at every splendid inch of the art. You can perch on a pillar and take in

the scene just the way Michelangelo must have. And, if your classmates and instructor are there too, you can engage in a dialogue about the meaning of it all.

Joe Miller, vice president of platform and technology development at Linden Lab, which operates Second Life, says "— It's a collaborative environment where you really feel like you're physically with other people." Because you're interacting in the form of an avatar—a digital representation of yourself—with other people's avatars in a three-dimensional world, "the feeling of shrinking the physical distance to zero is fairly dramatic in learning environments," he says.

Escape from traditional learning

Miller sees Second Life and other virtual worlds having important implications for learning. "They will become very rich adjuncts to many forms of traditional learning," he says. While he



JOE MILLER



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“SECOND LIFE REMOVES DISTANCE FROM THE DISTANCE LEARNING EQUATION.”

JOE MILLER, VICE PRESIDENT OF PLATFORM AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT, LINDEN LAB.

doesn't see them replacing traditional learning events, he foresees their use for teaching and learning both hard and soft skills throughout one's life.

“Many people don't realize that Second Life is driven on a free-form, user-created content basis. Our customers who are actively using the platform for learning today are creating detailed visualizations of products, equipment, and physical situations that would be very expensive to build in the real world. People can get up close, walk through them, use them, and learn from them.”

One example is British Petroleum's use of Second Life to train new gas station employees in the safety features of gasoline storage tanks and piping systems. In Second Life, BP built three-dimensional renderings of the tank and pipe systems at a typical gas station. Trainees could “see” underground and observe the effect of using safety devices to control the flow of gasoline. They were able to observe the workings of a very complex system in a way they could never have done in real life. “BP created a very immersive experience for the learners,” says Miller.

To date, several hundred organizations have created places for learning in Second Life that can be entered

from any computer anywhere. “We have more than 300 universities and colleges actively experimenting with accredited courses in Second Life,” says Miller.

Many of those institutions, and some corporations, are re-creating traditional learning environments with seats, podiums, and screens in their virtual worlds. Miller believes that is not the best approach.

“That doesn't create a new way of thinking in adult learners' minds about how they are experiencing the material,” he says. “The most interesting models come from those who have realized that the experience of collaboratively learning and exchanging ideas with others is very powerful.”

They have begun to experiment with ways to expose learners to content or experiences that may not have an analog in traditional training. IBM is one of the most active experimenters. More than 6,000 IBM employees log into Second Life at least once a week for a whole variety of purposes—from training to engaging customers in dialogue about products and services. CEO Sam Palmisano has used Second Life to hold meetings with IBM's worldwide workforce.



One of the more interesting IBM applications is a space in Second Life where retired IBMers come to chat about issues of the day and share institutional knowledge with current employees. “It’s a very informal setting that’s more like a mixer than a learning session,” says Miller. Proximal 3-D voice capability makes it very easy to walk your avatar up to a group or an individual and start a conversation. “Applications like that are natural and effective learning venues,” says Miller.

Unconventional learning

Starwood Hotels used Second Life to learn from customers before building the first of its new line of hi-tech, loft-like hotels called Aloft. They designed and built a prototype hotel in Second Life where “customers” could walk through the hotel and give feedback. Pontiac has an environment in Second Life that allows engineers to talk with customers—an opportunity car engineers have seldom had. Knowing that many Second Life users are information technology professionals, Cisco created a presence in Second Life to maintain a dialogue with them. NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, uses Second Life to show how their hurricane aircraft

work. Users can fly into a virtual hurricane. In another full-immersion experience, visitors can learn how tsunamis build and play out. And they can experience the weather anywhere in the United States in 3-D.

Museums have been pioneers in exploring Second Life as a means to bring their collections to a wider audience in unconventional ways. The Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose has just opened Tech Virtual in Second Life, where you can curate your own exhibit and interact with it. “Some of the exhibits are designed specifically for use in Second Life and don’t have an analog in the real world,” says Miller.

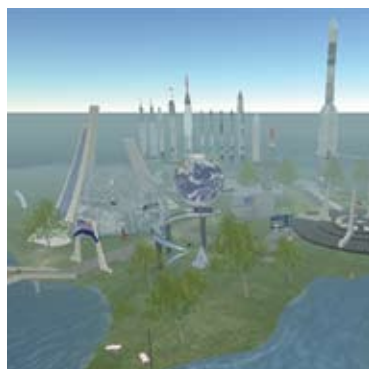
NASA owns an island in Second Life where a team of scientists is working on ways to link the astronauts who will go to Mars back to their families, friends, and co-workers on Earth. NASA thinks that the 3-D virtual world will help combat the psychological isolation that the 800-day mission could cause. In Second Life, they’d be able to sit at the dinner table with their families, help kids with homework, and meet with Earth-bound NASA employees. “ET, phone home” becomes a (virtual) reality.

If it seems that lack of imagination is the only barrier to leveraging the

experiential learning power of virtual worlds, that’s not quite true, according to Miller. “We’re in the very early stages of this work. There are some significant hurdles to using this technology effectively today.” Linden Lab and other companies in the industry are working to make virtual reality systems less technically demanding on computers and users.

Miller, who began his career in learning technology years ago with PLATO, an early instructional technology venture, believes that “the opportunities for this technology to bring new learning experiences to kids and adults are largely untapped so far. “He has observed that those users who have had the most success have not just built traditional classrooms in 3-D. They’ve used virtual reality’s simulation capabilities—the ability to engage in team exercises and longer-term learning experiences. “Now the question is how can we bring Second Life to a much wider audience at a true web scale for a whole host of applications.” **T+D**

Joe Miller was interviewed by Pat Galagan, executive editor, ASTD; pgalagan@astd.org.



AVATAR OF JOE MILLER

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