

Using Second Life for Knowledge Transfer and Collaboration

by T. Troy McConaghy

A presentation (not a paper), designed to be presented entirely within the virtual world of Second Life, with slides.

Abstract

This presentation covers examples of ways the virtual world Second Life is being used for knowledge transfer and collaboration, particularly in the sciences. The central thesis is that Second Life works well as a platform for real-time meetings with other people (for presentations, planning sessions, and classes for example), but not so well for large amounts of static media like text.

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T. Troy McConaghy

Good morning! Today I'm going to talk about "Second Life" and how it can be used for knowledge transfer and collaboration. I've prepared about 15 minutes worth of slides and notes and expect my discussion with you to take about 15 minutes, for a total of 30 minutes. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to chat them at any time. Don't wait until the end! I've been using Second Life for about two years, so I have some basic understandings about it. Okay, so what is Second Life?

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Second Life is a place, just like Stockholm or Idaho, except it's simulated on thousands of computers. To visit Second Life, you can get a free account and download a free browser at secondlife.com. There's lots of STUFF in Second Life --- like grass, telephone booths, clouds and seagulls. Some of the stuff is made by Linden Lab, the creators of the Second Life software, but most of it is made by the users of Second Life. To me, the most interesting part of Second Life is the other users.



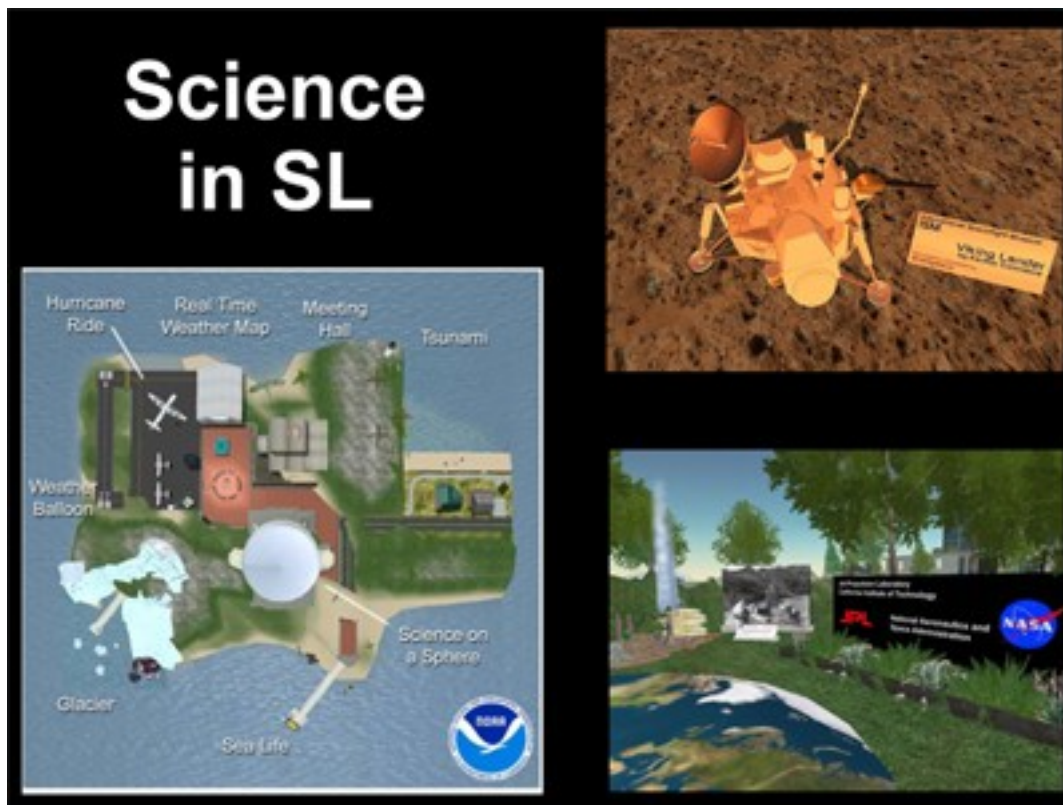
When in Second Life, you can communicate with other people in a variety of ways. If everything is set up just right, then you can talk with other people using your vocal chords and your ears just like usual. You can also communicate by text chat. Everyone within 20 meters will see your text chat. If you want a private conversation, you can do private voice or text instant messages. Second Life supports video and audio streams inworld, like NASA TV or Internet radio stations. You can also build 3D objects, write notecards, make gestures, run animations, import images and more.

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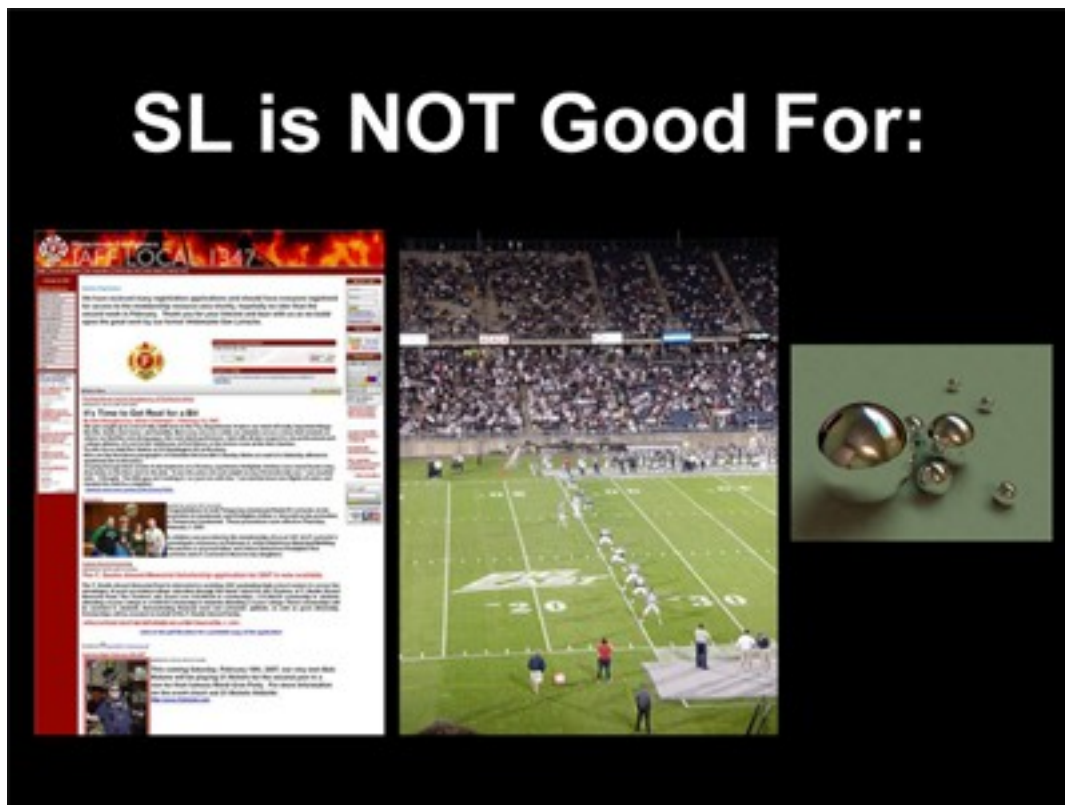
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If you view SL as a tool for communication, then there are some old things and some new things. The OLD things are things like text chat and VoIP. One of the NEW things is the ability to frame a meeting's context and tone using architecture. For example, people behave differently in churches than they do in pubs. Another new thing is the ability to control overall body language. You can sit or stand at a formal meeting. Most people sit. When you encounter someone, you can face any direction you want, but most people face each other. And so on. You can also control your appearance in SL, so you can change from a koala to a prince with the click of a button. All of these new things lead to a greater sense of other people's presence: It FEELS like they are there with you in the same space, even though they may be on the other side of the planet. When you have these new elements, plus the low cost to USE Second Life, I think you get a qualitatively new tool for knowledge transfer and collaboration.



I'd like to take a few minutes to tell you about some science-related projects and places in Second Life. I maintain a list of science-related places in SL. It currently has about 50 places. Some science-related organizations with SL places are: JPL, NASA Ames, the International Spaceflight Museum, the National Space Society, the UK's National Physical Laboratory, NOAA, the CDC, Nature Publishing Group, and the Exploratorium (which is a science center in San Francisco). There are also over a hundred universities with some kind of presence in SL. Their level of involvement varies widely. So what do you find at these places? Most have some information about their organization, plus a variety of exhibits. Some have interactive activities. For example, on the NOAA island, you can ride an airplane through a hurricane to take measurements. Some of the organizations have regular meetings, presentations, or other events in SL. For example, there is a NASA CoLab meeting every Tuesday at 1:00 PM Pacific Time. Reps from almost all NASA centers come, as do members of the general public. Some organizations, like Nature Publishing Group, provide space where people can build and display science-related projects. There are also science classes using SL for part of their curriculum. They might have discussions, do ethnographic research, build projects, or give presentations, all in SL.



Over time, we've found out that there are some things SL is NOT good for. If you build something for your organization in SL, don't expect the Media to jump on it and give you a big PR hit. That might have worked a year ago, but it usually won't work anymore. SL isn't good at displaying lots of images and text. If that's all you want to do, use the World Wide Web. As an aside, I'd like to note that Linden Lab intends to let you view web pages inside SL some day. SL isn't good for complex simulations or 3D modeling. Also, don't plan for a big event with thousands of people in one area. The most people you can possibly cram into one area is 400. SL is also not very reliable. Although it's officially out of beta, the experience is still very much like beta software, with bugs and constant upgrades. By the end of June 2007, there were 5.2 million unique people who'd tried SL, but only 495,000 people used SL for more than an hour in June. That's a 10% retention rate, so 9 out of 10 people who try SL leave and don't come back. Therefore SL is an early-stage technology, used mostly by early adopters. But don't let that lull you into complacency. SL, or something like it, is here to stay. It can only get better.



SL is good for many things. Live events work really well (at least for 400 people or fewer). Think live music, focus groups, meetings, discussions, tours, debates, presentations, or watching the launch of the Space Shuttle with space enthusiasts from around the world. There was a recent "SL Best Practices in Education" conference with around 1300 registered attendees from around the world. All of these events are great opportunities to meet people with similar interests, and people with similar interests can join groups to create COMMUNITIES. Not all events have to be planned. It's possible to create places and activities that inspire impromptu events. One cool thing about discussion events in SL is that everyone can "speak" (with text chat) at once. The chat history records a transcript which you read it at your own pace. That's very different from voice-based discussions, where people must take turns because humans can't make sense of two people speaking at once. In classes that have used SL, they've found that the multi-speaker chat capability leads to more student participation. SL is also good for getting public feedback on proposed buildings or city designs, for tracking visitors in detail (but note the privacy issues), and for training by simulation.

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That concludes my prepared notes. Were there any more questions?