

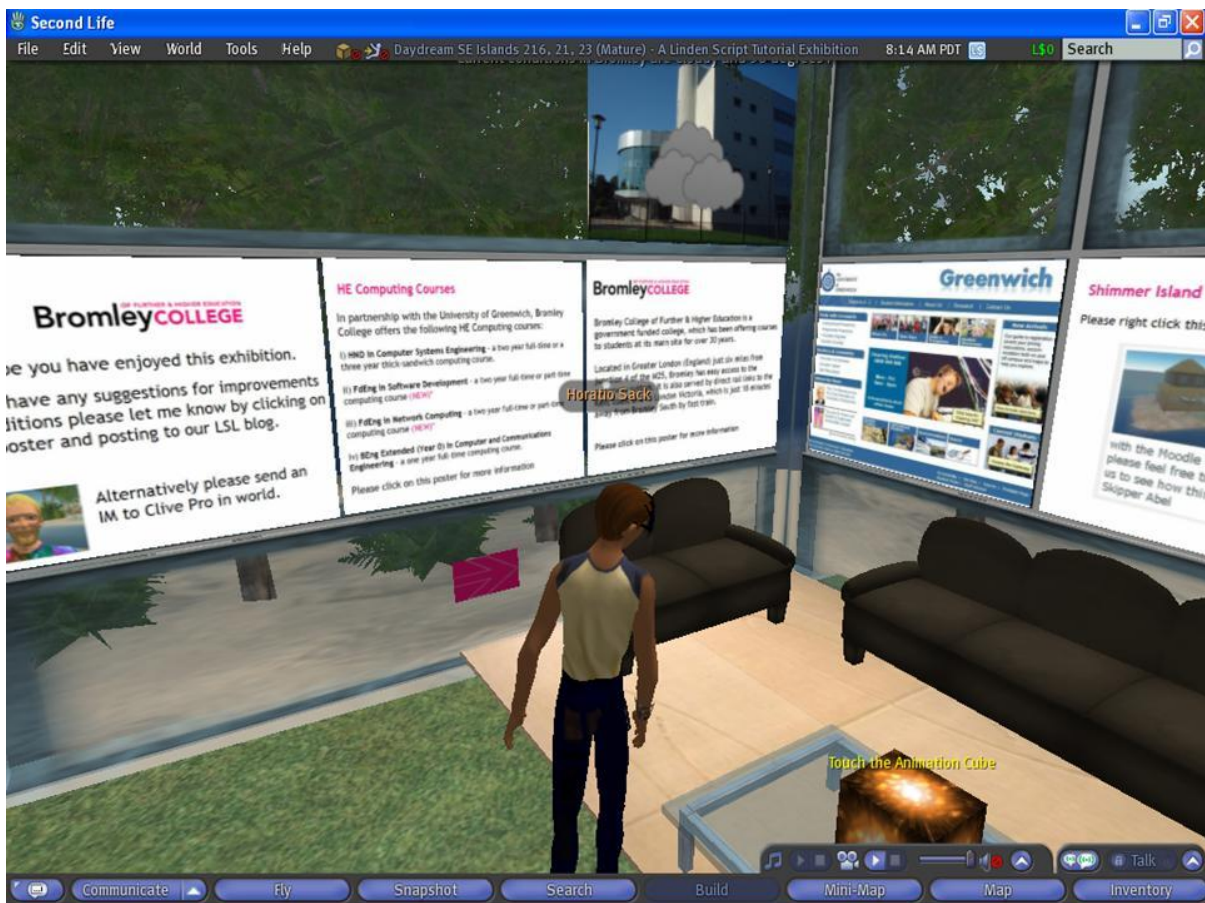
Second Life - Could It Be Good For Our Health?

30-Apr-08

I used to have a poster on my wall showing a group of people trekking through virgin snow somewhere remote with the caption: "For those that know life is not a dress rehearsal". I often remember this - usually when I'm overworked or staring at queues of traffic - and tell myself I should make more of my chance.

But now, maybe help is at hand. You and I have the chance of a second life ... well, okay, an existence within Second Life, actually, but who's being picky. Second Life, or SL to its Residents, is the brainchild of Linden Labs, a virtual world that gives you and I the chance to be the person we always wanted to be, to live life however we like. Sounds fun, doesn't it? And, by and large, it is. But is it any use?

Individuals, known as Residents, interact with each other through motional characters, known as avatars. They can explore, meet other Residents, socialise, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade items and services with one another. Virtual money is available (Linden dollars) which can be exchanged for real US\$... the exchange rate fluctuates though roughly you can get L\$250 to US\$1. A few people derive net incomes from the economy, though this is marginal.



The Maldives was the first country to open a virtual embassy in SL, where visitors can talk face-to-face with a computer-generated ambassador about visas, trade and other issues. Religious organisations have begun to

open virtual meeting places, where their leaders suggest a less-threatening environment exists in which people are more willing to explore and discuss spiritual things.

Academic institutions offer virtual classrooms where administrators host lectures, whilst Info Islands provide libraries with virtual reference desks manned by real life volunteer librarians. Universities and colleges, mostly in the States, are promoting real courses, advertising jobs, or offering communities of practice to support learning. The Open University has been an active participant since 2006 and scored a European first when it created an educational island in the parallel teen version of SL (SL is an adults only world).

SL has some problems to tackle (as does the real world) ... as a consequence of being an open environment there are moral and financial issues. Much like real life, Residents can form partnerships and locations have been created where x-rated activity occurs. Fortunately, Residents can opt to screen themselves out of these less savoury locations.

On the financial front, in September 2007 Linden Lab announced they would be required to charge VAT on SL land fees to users inside the EU. This increased the business costs to many users, making it difficult for them to compete with non-EU businesses. This is an on-going issue, not least because of the difficulty in identifying the place of origin of SL's Residents.

So, my avatar was born and named Horatio Sack ... dressed, learnt to walk and exchanged niceties with a little, fat Buddha, all before his first birthday (first hour, not year, you understand). Transferred to the mainland Horatio was left to fend for himself; he wandered a while, bumped into a few people and read many a billboard before finding his feet and (oh, the beauty of virtual reality) discovered how to fly! This important form of motion seriously reduced Horatio's frustration at ambling around one place and showed me just how amazing the 3-D graphics (and sheer scale) of SL are. When Horatio then discovered the facility to be transported through space to any public location he was an even happier chappy ... 5 minutes in one place, then off to another with no damage to my carbon footprint.

Horatio has been moseying around SL for a few days now and has enough of a feel for life in SL to suggest there may be some benefits for healthcare. This world is about educating and informing, making connections with Residents about things of general interest. There is scope to buy space on billboards for critical public health information, such as anti-smoking posters, safe sex campaigns or details about NHS Direct. We should remember, however, that SL's biggest user base is American, so how much these messages would be seen needs some research.

One of the biggest areas of development is undoubtedly in the education arena and there may be scope to provide learning opportunities. It would be wonderful to create new space in SL, such as a hospital or surgery, and populate it with learning spots showing educational video clips, promotion of healthcare careers and offering face-to-face healthcare advice. If the cost of virtual building is too high then there may be scope for encouraging communities of interest to gather, run meetings or directing users to video awareness spots. Logic suggests that this is done initially in partnership with academic groups, possibly as projects within courses of study.

This is an area that is going to grow and, as the next generation of doctors and nurses come through the system, they will be more and more computer savvy. The opportunities for education are immense: whether this is the right world to engage in at this time is hard to tell. There is never a best time to invest in new technology as we will always see something better round the next corner, but if we are to understand how virtual worlds are able to benefit patient care then maybe now is a good time to test the water.

Further information and sources of inspiration:

SL was launched in 2003 and by the end of March 2008 had 13 million registered accounts. Whilst many of these accounts are inactive, or refer to Residents with multiple accounts, activity is still high. Residents spent over 28 million hours in SL in January 2008, with around 38,000 people logged on at any one time. You can visit Second Life and create your own avatar at: <http://secondlife.com>.

A useful article looking at employer's use of Second Life, entitled "Out of the World", was printed in the 17 April 2008 edition of the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development's magazine "People Management". This can be accessed at: <http://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/pm/articles/2008/03/Out-of-this-world.htm>.

The NHS Faculty of Health Informatics is running an event on 15 May 2008 at the British Library in London entitled "The Power and the Perils of Social Networking tools in the NHS". The event is free of charge; details and booking arrangements can be found at: <http://etdevents.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/all/1601>.



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<http://healthcybermap.org/sl.htm>

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