Companies, colleges use virtual worlds as training tools

By Kevin Tampone
Journal Staff

It's no secret that online and distance learning have been growing in popularity in recent years.

Colleges everywhere are running full-blown degree programs and more businesses are doing the same for training and work-force development. But even the best online-learning software has drawbacks.

"Some of the concern is you lose that face-to-face connection," says Terry Keys, director of instructional technologies at Monroe Community College. "A lot of online learning is text-based."

Students and instructors can feel they're somehow missing out on something if there's no personal interaction, Keys says. Although online learning can draw more people into a class because its nature forces participation from everyone, personal connections can sometimes be lost.

Some colleges and companies are finding that virtual worlds, such as the popular Second Life, offer a way to add some of those connections back into an online learning experience.

Second Life and other virtual worlds allow users to create digital representations of themselves, called avatars. Those avatars move through and interact with a three-dimensional, computer-generated environment.

The uses are nearly endless. Many people simply use Second Life for entertainment. But an increasing number of educational institutions and businesses are finding it useful for training.

"It gives you a different approach to things," Keys says. "I see it as being another tool in the toolbox. It's not for everything, but certainly something that can address students' needs."

Virtual worlds are also big business. Venture-capital firms and companies invested more than $425 million in 15 virtual-world companies in the United States in the fourth quarter of 2007 alone, according to Virtual Worlds Management, which tracks the industry.

In the third quarter of 2007, firms invested $220 million in 23 different companies.

Companies and venture firms that have invested in virtual worlds recently include Omnicon, Alloy Ventures and Storm Ventures, Vickers Financial Group, DNX Media Ltd., Benchmark Capital, Canaan Partners, GrandBanks Capital, Hummer Winblad Venture Partners, Trinity Ventures, Rustic Canyon Ventures, Providence Equity Partners, Charles River Ventures, Kodak Venture Partners and Pequot Ventures, Gigamedia, Sony and Time Warner, Microsoft, and BigFish Games.

San Francisco-based Linden Lab, the company that created Second Life, employs more than 200 people.

Although the potential educational uses for virtual worlds are broad, it can be as simplistic as gathering together in a virtual classroom. Users can then interact in that virtual world as if they were in a real classroom.

There's something, Keys says, about the ability to see others in a common environment that can enhance online learning.

The applications for training, however, go far beyond classroom meetings, says Jill Hurst-Wahl, president of Hurst Associates, Ltd. in Syracuse. Hurst-Wahl has taught in Second Life in the past and, along with Keys, was part of a panel discussion on the topic for the Central New York chapter of the American Society for Training & Development in February.

Companies are starting to see virtual worlds as a way to bring employees together for everything from customer-service training to team-building exercises. And many are finding creative ways to take advantage of an alternate reality's unique capabilities.

For example, instead of simply naming a class on customer service, companies are designing simulations to train employees on, responding to specific scenarios. Workers taking the training can navigate the scenario on their own, Hurst-Wahl says.

"For team building, you might have a team that's dispersed around the world that can go into Second Life and do something together," she says.

Companies are also starting to experiment with using virtual worlds, of which there are more than 50, for customer-facing functions. Some are exploiting establishing virtual trade shows that could run 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Hurst-Wahl says.

Other companies are looking at establishing their own, proprietary virtual worlds, she adds.

"A global corporation could never bring everyone together in one spot, but they could in a virtual world," she says.

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