

## ABSEL Keynote:

# Using Virtual Worlds for Business and Learning

## Presented to the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning

by Pollywog Gardenvale



Virtual panelists from left, Lauren Lamonica, Jeremy Kemp, George E. Kurtz III, Justin Lyoon, and Selby Evans, Ph.D.

Once a year, a prestigious group of gaming elite meets to discuss techniques and strategy, and also to enjoy the good company of like-minded serious gamers. These are not the “hard-core gamers” described by Chris Melissinos, Chief Gaming Officer of Sun Microsystems. Rather, they are the original serious gamers—educators from the top business schools from around the world.

ABSEL (Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning) was formed in 1974 as a professional association dedicated to the development and promotion of experiential techniques and simulations in the field of business education and development. It is significant that ABSEL is not a spawn of the microcomputer era. Their primary interest is effective teaching. They use technology as long as it serves to fulfill that goal, but they are not especially driven by it—at least not in the “early adopter” sense, nor are they entirely dependent upon it.

Some of the papers presented at this conference included, “Shared Experience as Incentive for Horizontal Integration in Business Simulations,” “Comparing Student Learning in Online and Classroom Formats of the Same Course,” “College Students’ Expectations of Technology-Enhanced Classrooms: Comparing 1996 and 2006,” and “Issues in Porting a LAN-Based Total Enterprise Simulation Game to a Web-Based Environment.”

Richard Platt, Ph.D., Associate Professor of MIS at the University of West Florida, and president of ABSEL for the 2007-08 term, explains what they hope to accomplish:

“Most of the members of ABSEL are college or university faculty who either write or use simulations or experiential exercises when teaching their classes. My intent was to get someone for the keynote who could open our eyes to the potential of Second Life as a learning platform that we can use to expand our simulations, experiential exercises, and online classes.”

My mission was to show them something they hadn’t seen before. Although I was confident that I could do that, I couldn’t pretend to be an expert on this subject, so I set out to find some. As it turns out, Second Life—and the broader Internet in general—is just crawling with them.

My first stop was the new Association of Virtual Worlds, where I sent out a request for anyone with a business simulation application they would like to share. That’s where I found Justin Lyoon, founder and CEO of Simudyne—a London-based company that specializes in high-end simulations. Then, I did a Google search on “Second Life” and “experiential learning,” and ended up at the SLoodle sim in Second Life. While there I ran into avatar Buddy Sprockett, who in real life is Dan Livingstone, from Paisley University in Scotland. He recom-

mended that I also contact Jeremy Kemp of San Jose State University, who, along with Dan, is co-founder of the SLoodle project. Next, I called two of my most wise friends from Second Life—avatar Butch Dae (George E. Kurtz III, of the Virtual Information Technology project) and Thinkerer Melville (Selby Evans, a retired professor of psychology) who were happy to share their expertise. Selby suggested that I also include examples of the technical training models developed by Virginia Dickensen (avatar Xenon Darrow) of eLuminata.

Just when I thought that my panel of experts was complete, I received a press release from Mat Small of Millions of Us, announcing the launch of Palomar Pomerado Health District’s “Hospital of the Future,” an architectural simulation and showcase of new technology. I told Mat about my upcoming speech and he arranged for an in-world meeting with Lauren Lamonica, the producer who worked on the project.

So that is how the panel took shape. I now had representatives from both the educational and business communities who have developed practical applications using cutting-edge virtual world technology. My role became more of an aggregator and moderator, as I wove all these pieces together into a cohesive presentation that would show how the technology is currently being used, and also identify key players and resources.

The conference was held at a beautiful, harbor-side resort in Charleston, South Carolina, and I found the ABSEL members to be a most interesting and congenial group of people. As Richard Platt says, ABSEL is the “best kept secret around.” I’m certainly going to become a member, and I’ve even been invited to come back and present a paper!

Here’s an image that has stuck with me: During the Q&A, someone asked if he could use Second Life to meet face-to-face with his distance-learning students: “Could we sit under a tree and talk?” The answer, of course, was “Yes, you can!”

I came away with the realization that there’s a big opportunity here—not only for ABSEL members, but also for those who can help them make the transition. Although moving to an immersive 3D environment is the natural next step, most of these educators simply do not have the time to learn a new technology, must less build out an entire simulation. Here’s a reality check: many are still in the process of migrating their material from a local area network to the 2D web. However, there were quite a few who had specific projects in mind that they would like to see translated to a 3D environment. They are the ones who will lead the charge. It may take a few years, but I’m sure that eventually the topic of immersive 3D simulations will dominate the ABSEL conference programs.

The full transcript of the speech, including text, audio, and video, is posted on The Seventh Sun website. ☚