TOURISM EDUCATION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS – FUTURE OR FANTASY? USING SECOND LIFE FOR TEACHING TOURISM & HOSPITALITY

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Simulations and games are a way of life for today's young people who no longer spend hours watching television like their parents did, but instead are engaged in Googling, Twittering, Facebooking or Myspacing[1] their friends. Brought up in an environment of virtual communication, visual complexity and online identities, young people want and expect more engaging, empowering and interactive learning experiences in their student life than universities are normally able to offer.

There has been a huge growth in the development of virtual 'worlds' over the past five years, with over 500 educational institutions, museums and libraries actively using or experimenting with virtual environments, and more than 5,000 teachers on the Second Life Educators' mailing list alone (Linden Labs, 2009). Virtual worlds are engaging, stimulating spaces where students can meet online for normal class activities, including lectures, discussions, case studies, projects, papers, exams, and labs. Gartner, Inc. (Gartner, 2007) has estimated that by 2011, 80% of all Internet users will have an avatar in a virtual world, and hundreds of 'worlds' are already available or in development. Because so many institutions have already established a presence in a virtual world, it is likely that this technology will go mainstream on many campuses around the globe, and virtual worlds like Second Life could become part of every university's teaching toolkit – enabling them to provide a shared, interactive learning space where students and teachers can meet together in real time for creative learning activities.

[1] Social networking – communicating using Twitter, Facebook or MySpace

Business organizations will also find ways to collaborate, communicate, and provide training for their employees and in so doing begin to interface with education. Price (2008) states that, "Virtual worlds also have the potential to enhance and enrich education. Such technologies can bring learning to life in a way that is not readily matched by other digital media." Tourism boards, consulates, travel agencies, hotels, restaurants and other tourism-related businesses have also built a presence in virtual worlds, and in so doing, provide students with a way to explore realistic destinations and interact with local inhabitants. Virtual conferences, trade shows, meetings and career fairs are also taking place enabling students to experience the business world without leaving home.

This paper explores the background to virtual worlds, examines how they are being used in tourism education and business today, and illustrates the potential and pitfalls for teachers considering using virtual worlds. It describes how one university in Asia has used a virtual world for tourism education, the types of learning activities that were developed, how students reacted and used the medium, and some of the problems experienced. The study examined nine tourism and hospitality courses using virtual worlds and provides some guidelines for other educators considering using virtual worlds for their own courses. The study concludes that despite the challenges, virtual worlds won't disappear, and the potential benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. The conclusion is that the use of virtual worlds will continue to grow exponentially as young people increasingly use them to learn, play and work, and that in time virtual worlds will become as commonplace as instant messaging or email.

KEY WORDS: Tourism education, E-learning, Virtual worlds, Second Life, Simulations

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