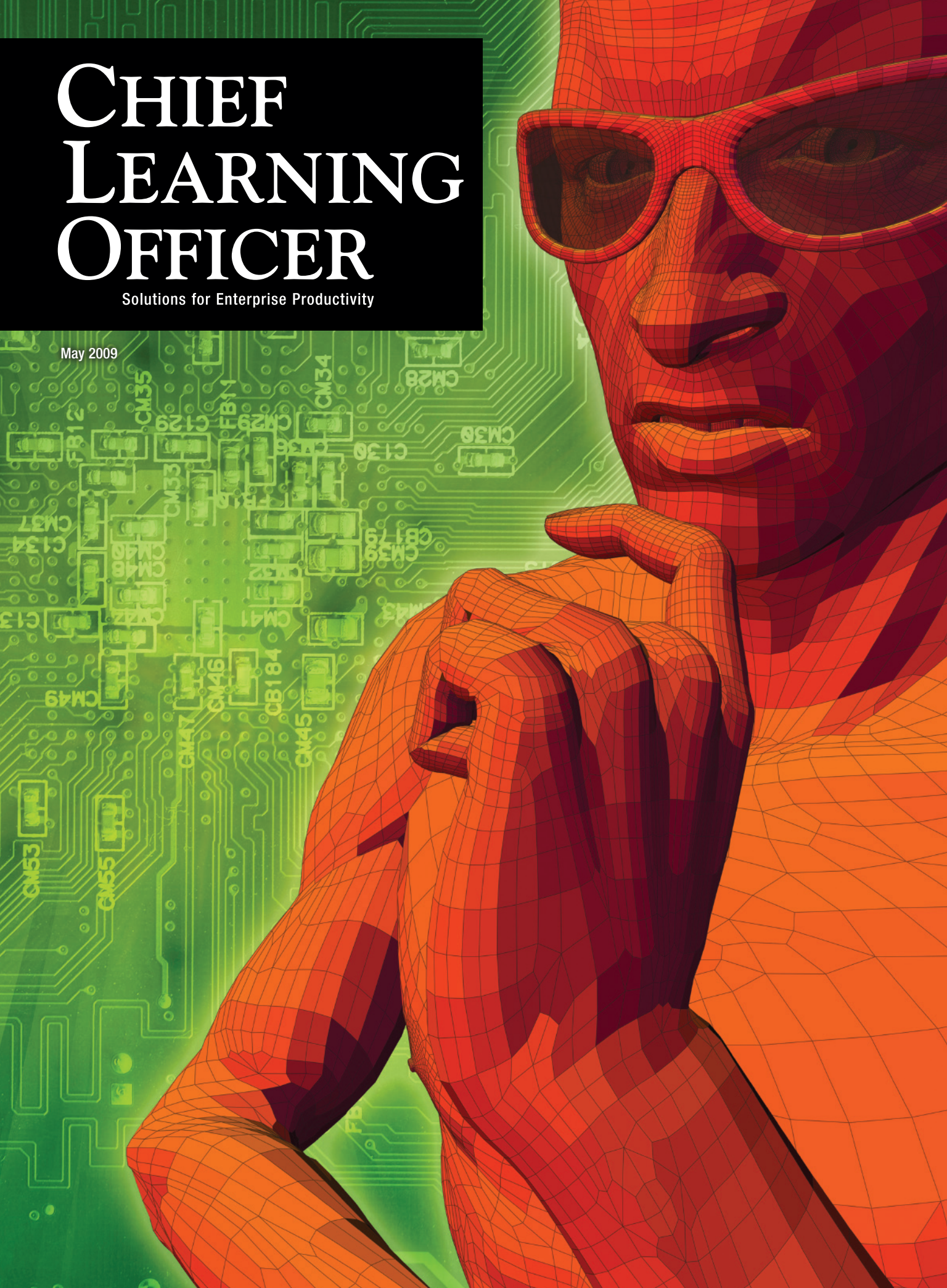


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A Second Look at Second Life

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Given tightened budgets, virtual worlds are earning another look as a cost-effective way to deliver development across regional boundaries. To make the most of the technology, be aware of the technical, security and instructional aspects of learning in virtual worlds.

Consider the following scenario: Your workforce is spread across a number of regions. Functional areas in your organization have common goals and learning programs to meet them, but the travel and expenses for training have become a roadblock. While the price tag always was accepted grudgingly as part of the cost of delivery, now it leaps off the budget sheet as a candidate for cancellation.

And consider this: We know education is a vital lever for bringing corporate strategy to life, for enabling people to acquire the skills, knowledge and beliefs necessary to perform. And yet, you sense that your programs just aren't having the desired impact. Ratings are OK, but there doesn't seem to be much transfer from classroom learning to business performance. And there is pressure to do more with less, both in budget and time; yet, you feel that somehow your audience needs much more.

Now imagine this: Your newly hired employees walk through a replica of your corporate offices and meet the people who work there. Compliance training, once a painful experience of sitting through hours of computer-based modules or classroom presentations has come to life through a series of live simulations. Your managers and their staffs meet other teams and work on product and service modeling, using their meeting space as a building ground, iterating on designs together.

Those critical moments in individual and team performance that can make or break the business are practiced in real time, with observation and coaching. Selected members of your retiring workforce sign up to

meet the next generation of leaders and walk through galleries with them, telling the stories from their experience and transmitting culture and wisdom.

Everyone is there, and no one is together.

Virtual worlds rapidly are becoming part of the technology landscape. Not only has Second Life, one of the most popular virtual worlds, garnered more than 13 million residents, but other players such as Forterra's Olive, The Croquet Consortium, Sun Microsystems's Project Wonderland, ProtonMedia's Protosphere and Qwaq Forums

have come into the mix as providers of alternative 3-D online environments. Are organizations paying attention? Yes, with IBM leading the way, having allocated more than \$10 million to virtual-world development. And it's not just the high-tech companies that are experimenting. The World Bank, Nike, Dell, Disney, Novartis, BMW, Reuters and Unilever all have set up shop in Second Life.

Individuals and businesses are even making money using the Second Life currency, which can be exchanged for real dollars. More than 200 individual residents and groups are making more than \$5,000 each month. And virtual worlds continue to be developed, with dozens coming online last year and more to come. Research from virtual-worlds consultancy Kzero has identified six different virtual worlds for people 30 years old and older.

But what do these worlds provide that is new and different, and why should we pay attention? The first step is to understand some basics about

DATA POINT

A recent survey conducted by IT advisory firm Cutter Consortium indicates that 87 percent of respondents see virtual worlds as beneficial to education and training efforts.

DATA POINT

As of March 2009, there were an estimated 13 million residents in Second Life, up from 2.3 million in January 2007. 1.4 million logged on during a period of 60 days.

Source: Linden Labs.

these environments and what advantages they provide over other conventional technologies.

Virtual worlds vs. games: Unlike online games such as “World of Warcraft” or “A Tale in the Desert,” there is no prescribed script, story line or set of objectives for the participants in virtual worlds. There are no winners and losers — these are social environments. Participants in Second Life are referred to as residents rather than players, hinting

at something deeper than what you might find in game-based environments.

Building allowed: Another key differentiator of virtual worlds is that they provide tools for the residents to use in constructing content, including 3-D virtual objects such as buildings, landscapes, vehicles, clothing items, skin textures and waterfalls. Many of these resident-created items will link to media files or other Web content, enabling others to see, hear and experience something new.

There also are tools that allow residents to capture video of actions taking place in the virtual world, a type of media called “machinima.” (There often are contests for the best films. For an example, visit the Second Life Trailer contest at secondlife.com/showcase/trailercontest_2006.php.)

Objects created in Second Life can be given away or sold to other residents for in-world currency, creating a micro-economy in which virtual items, and in some cases their real-world equivalents, are bought and sold. The Linden currency can be sold for real money, and individuals often purchase Linden dollars using their credit cards. At press time, the exchange rate was 265 Lindens per U.S. dollar.

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Me, myself, my avatar: Potentially the most important differentiator — and least understood — is the avatar, the 3-D representation of the resident. In gaming environments, the choices are fairly limited to character, appearance and affiliation with groups, but in Second Life, the avatar is almost entirely built from scratch. Residents have an expansive set of choices to make about their avatars, initially based on a male or female human form. From that initial choice, they may make countless adjustments to skin color, body style, clothing and hair length. And once in-world, they may choose to spend their Lindens on additional clothing, accessories, tattoos or eyeglasses. Residents can even abandon the human form altogether, assuming the appearance of any animal, plant or object they wish.

The choices for the avatar-resident extend beyond body style and clothing. Once in Second Life, residents can choose or be invited to join clubs or groups. These affinity groups may range from groups providing services in-world to groups dedicated to a particular field of study or cause, both in-world and in real life. Group memberships can be displayed in one's profile in-world, providing other residents a view into each others' areas of interest and expertise. There are numerous professional development and education-related groups already in existence. Residents begin to “belong.”

We're not in Kansas: The fourth differentiator is the beguilingly simple fact that virtual worlds are not constrained by real-world physics. While this may appear to be a no-brainer, it is worth consideration when imagining and planning what can be done in these spaces. For example, in Second Life, avatars are not constrained to walking across the landscape. They can simply fly up into the virtual sky, soar to their next destination, float to observe the goings-on below or use the teleport function to materialize in a different location.

Also, the landscape does not even need to be that: It can be emptiness populated with objects, such as the planets and moons of our solar system, where a resident can stand on the rings of a virtual Saturn. Or consider the molecular scientist who wishes to demonstrate in large, manipulative format a molecule otherwise difficult to see and nearly impossible to push around and modify.

While all of this may make heads spin, it's important to consider the key differentiators of this technology from an educator's perspective:

1. Residents have tools at their disposal to create objects and media.
2. Objects or environments created by residents persist for others to experience.

IN PRACTICE THE LEARNING FUNCTION AS A DESIGN LAB

One of the challenges CLOs face today is how to ensure continuing learning and development in turbulent economic times. Pressure on learning functions to reduce budgets has driven a renewed examination of existing programs with an eye to reduce or eliminate some. That is not all bad.

Perhaps it is time to eliminate or rework programs whose relevance has diminished over time or are otherwise not delivering real business performance. But at the same time, how can CLOs preserve strategically important programs in light of across-the-board travel bans?

Turning to technology may be the solution. We went there in the 1990s, and that turned into a huge investment in canned content that in many cases failed to fulfill the original promise. The question today is, are there alternatives to design that leverage the wide range of technology we already have, so as to both reduce expenses and improve quality? The answer is yes.

Start with a few programs that can be redesigned and implemented fairly quickly. The new design needs to engage the workforce in new ways, supporting it through a process that holds pedagogical water: foundational content delivered in reasonable chunks and in compelling format; guided real-time exploration of those content areas to create meaning in context; and supported application of knowledge, skills and behaviors on the job.

How do we get it done? First, we need to challenge our orthodoxies around what a program is, what delivery looks like, where learning happens and how it happens. We need a clear understanding of the full capabilities that our existing infrastructure provides, and we need to go through a design analysis that preserves clear and measurable learning outcomes and then be open to new content and interaction designs that connect participants with content, peers and subject matter experts in compelling and effective ways.

The goal should be a reduction in location-dependent events of 50 percent, or even up to 100 percent. Consider what is normally spent on travel and expenses for everyone: the participants, the educators, the delivery teams. We begin to see the savings, but it's not all about T&E. Traditional in-place delivery of education relies on instructors and participants committing time away from work, time that bears a significant opportunity cost for the organization. Learning designers may find they can leverage internal experts and external faculty in new and less expensive ways that get an increased volume of effective learning experiences — essentially greater coverage in less time for less money.

Implied in this approach is change to the skill sets of the learning function. Care will need to be taken in piloting the new designs, preparing your instructors for delivery in new modalities, creating compelling content and building in assessments and accountability that ensure all phases of these new programs build toward successful individual, team and business performance.

Treat the challenge as a design laboratory. Overhaul designs and create something powerful.

— Steve Mahaley

The link between the virtual-world activity and the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed at a given role in the organization needs to be made explicit.

3. Residents have multiple channels for communication and affiliation with individuals and groups.
4. Real-world physics need not apply.

Getting Started

It is important to address the technical and security concerns that follow the use of technologies such as virtual worlds. There typically is software to install, hardware requirements for operation, and security issues in reaching through corporate firewalls to public virtual worlds and in what data is shared in those spaces. Credentialing and validating online identities is the topic of much debate and development at present. But with the development of platforms for installation behind the corporate firewall and integration with other systems, these concerns are being addressed.

There is a range of uses of virtual worlds that mirrors the degree to which we expect participants to be immersed. We can produce scripted experiences for learners to experience as an observer. In this scenario, we have essentially scripted what will happen, and participants have a sensing role in this environment. They observe or lightly participate in something an instructor has orchestrated and then explore the meaning of that in a guided debriefing session.

Alternatively, we can produce immersive experiences in which participants are completely immersed and everyone has an avatar. In this scenario, designers have thoughtfully created an environment in which learners collaborate and co-create content and meaning. They follow a set of guiding instructions and are largely left to their own devices to address the challenge at hand.

In either scripted or immersive access, the design of the in-world activities should be built upon clear learning outcomes, known competency frameworks and integrated with existing learning programs. The link

between the virtual-world activity and the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed at a given role in the organization needs to be made explicit, so transfer of the learning finds a home and is supported and rewarded.

Here are examples of scripted and immersive learning experiences in virtual worlds:

Scripted

- **Guided tours:** To spur a conversation on innovation, participants at a classroom session are taken through a guided tour of a virtual-world business to illustrate relevant points about this new environment. This leads to a reflective dialogue among the participants about the potential impact this environment will have on their business and what it means for their role in particular.

assignment could be simple to complex depending on the audience and desired outcomes, with debriefing both on the work product and on the process.

- **Business simulation:** Participants assume control of a real business and are given sales targets and a budget. This would likely be a small business selling clothing, for example. Assessing the market, understanding the dynamics of the economy, allocating finances and building relationships all are potential topics to be debriefed, linking back to real-world business decisions.

It still is early in the development and acceptance of this technology, and learning designers need to avoid leaping to wholesale conversion of programs to virtual-world deliveries. The key

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- **Interviews and panel discussions:** Participants in a classroom session are introduced on-screen to an in-world panel of experts who are interviewed by a host, followed by a question-and-answer period. Potential topics can include virtual- or real-world business practices, hiring practices, economics, compensation, innovation or teaming, with the twofold focus on the content of the discussion and the reflections on the experience of interacting with an avatar. Models of relevant locations and objects are used in the virtual space as points of discussion.

Immersive

- **Team building:** Consider the virtual equivalent of the typical in-place team-building exercise. Teams of participants are assigned the task of co-creating an object, event or environment in the virtual world. Learning the basic building techniques would be required, and a coach may be present in-world to help the team. This

will be focused experimentation. Identify a program that could benefit from a refresh in terms of design, examine all the technologies available and create a coherent design that includes an element of virtual-world experiences — experiences designed to leverage the unique qualities of these environments to deliver powerful, memorable and impactful learning.

Much like the Internet has been integrated and corporate intranets have developed as core learning and business environments, virtual worlds also will become another space in which learning and work occur. As learning leaders continue developing people even as budgets are constrained, virtual worlds provide a new locus for learning — always there, as big as you need them to be and right at your fingertips. [CLO](#)

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