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## Living In It: A Tale of Learning in Second Life

By Greg Pfister - Retired IBM Distinguished Engineer, Faculty Member at Colorado State University, and author of "In Search of Clusters."

I think I have experienced something that captures a unique advantage of virtual worlds, something that cannot be done in the one-dimensional text streams that lay across web 2.0 pages, and cannot even be done in real life.

It's not in the usual answers to a question I still hear: "What is Second Life [or another virtual world] good for?" I know all the standard answers: create your own new life, socialize, educate, introduce products, become a millionaire virtual land baroness, etc. I don't doubt those. They are real, and many have exploited them. But they don't grab me as something that is a unique advantage of a 3D world simulation.

Recently, however, I had an experience there that did grab me and I believe has significant implications for presentation techniques in virtual worlds. As I find the case with most things dealing with virtual worlds, I think this is best described as a narrative, the way I experienced it. So, here's the tale.

### Prolog

A while ago (this post got delayed more than six months by my moving into a new house), I happened on an invitation to take a free course in Second Life on negotiating skills, in exchange for commenting about the technology. Free! And something I always think I can learn more about. So I signed up.

The course was run by Mark Jankowski (avatar "Mark Wizenheim") of Shapiro Negotiations Institute. I'd taken another web-based negotiation course, given by a relocation program, so I had some direct experience to compare the Shapiro SL course against; and I've attended some seminars in SL. So I thought I knew roughly what to expect.

I dropped in at the SLURL (Second Life URL) for Shapiro's campus ahead of time to make

sure I wouldn't have some hangup on the day of the course, and also to be nosy and poke around. See the pictures scattered in this post; I later took Second Life snapshots of what I found.



Arriving, I found the usual collegiate-looking green quad that screams "education!", complete with trees, benches, and Georgian-like architecture buildings. There were also some red teleport boxes. Teleports are SL shortcuts: click, and you're elsewhere. So, I clicked.

I found myself in a baseball stadium skybox, looking out over the diamond. Interesting. OK, how do I get out? There was only one door, at the back, so I walked through and found myself falling down a black hole.



I landed in Christmas holiday scene, with big Christmas trees, a large snowman, gifts, a gingerbread house, and snow on the ground. Well, hmm. What else is there?

Walking through a door in a snow-adorned mountain on one side of the scene, I went through some blackness again, but without falling, and into a symphony concert hall. There was wood paneling, a small raised amphitheater seating area for an audience, and a space outfitted for a midsize orchestra with curved ranks of musicians' stations, each with a chair and a music stand, facing a conductor's lectern.

Curiouser and curiouser.

The exit out the side wall lead through blackness again to what I can only describe as an indoor pig farm, complete with pigs, and some strange signs. A dark wooded glen was appended nearby. I could find no further passage, so I clicked on a teleport pedestal - they were scattered everywhere but in the skybox - and found myself back in the quad.



Well, that was strange enough. Christmas with a symphony and a skybox? And pigs? I decided I really would show up for the course, if for no other reason than to see what that was all about.

## The Course

On the day of the course, the group of us who signed up met in the quad with Mark. He explained that this would be a run-through of the first phase of their negotiation class, covering preparation, and ushered us through the teleport to the baseball skybox.

In the skybox, he described a negotiation they had done on behalf of a baseball player who was asking for more money than ever previously paid for a shortstop, his position. Preparation: They checked other infield positions, not just shortstop, found many paid higher, and given that data were able to convince the player's club to agree with his request. The message was not to be too narrow in checking out your own worth. We were then posed with a question, and voted by walking into circles designating our choices, had some discussion about it, and left through the back door.

Down the rabbit hole to Christmas-land we went, where we heard about negotiations between a large store and the Amalgamated Order of Real Bearded Santas. The order had a local monopoly, and was jacking up prices. Preparation: Found that the store in the past had its own Santa program. At Shapiro's suggestion, the store said they would pay this year, but next year re-start their own Santa program, and not use AORBS. AORBS caved. Message: Don't limit yourself to the present; look to the past, and also use possible future actions as a lever. Voting dance again, and onwards through the black corridor.



In the symphony hall, we heard the tale of a conductor who wanted them to negotiate for him to get a \$1 raise. Preparation: Find out what was up with this nut. It turned out that he just wanted the organization to acknowledge that he was special, and getting \$1 above union scale would do that. They got him a star on his dressing room door instead. He was delighted, and a potential mess with the union was avoided. Message: Understand what you really want from a negotiation; it may be different from what you are asking for, allowing movement within the negotiation.

Then everybody teleported back to the Quad, went into a conference room, and discussed what we thought. I gave the opinion that the settings probably took a huge amount of effort to construct; on general principles, they probably could have gotten 80% of the effect with 20% of the work. That got a polite nod, like "probably so." I also asked whether they thought Second Life was the best vehicle for this kind of thing. Mark acknowledged that, in particular, they had problems with setup. They actually bought laptops, preconfigured them with SL installed, and shipped them to executive clients for use in the sessions. That also hit me as a major investment. He said they of course got them back, and thought it was worth it when re-used across multiple clients.

That, I then thought, was it.



## The Follow-Up

A week or so later, I receive an email request for any follow-up comments. I was ready to provide some unsurprising replies, when I realized something: Everything from that course was still clear in my mind.

In comparison, when I thought back to it, I remembered almost nothing from the earlier webinar I'd attended. Furthermore, the "almost" part was costly: in a salary negotiation a while back, forgetting one principle from the webinar cost me about a factor of two in consulting fees. *Now* I'll remember it. Grrr.

Also, my memory of this course was strongly anchored by those settings. I'd think of the orchestra pit, and zang! that conductor sprang to mind, and the point of the session with him. Ditto for the Christmas place and the skybox. Everything I wrote above about the sessions is, in fact, direct from memory. I didn't take any notes during the course. This is unusual for me. I am normally terrible on details, remembering relatively little outside of my notes. So what happened?

Certainly the examples used were memorable, and Mark is an excellent speaker and teacher. But the webinar instructor was good too, and, as far as I recall, which isn't much, her examples were quite good, too. But that isn't what stands to attention in my mind when I think back on this SL course: It's the settings.

Somehow, the experience of walking around inside those places, navigating their geographies, being immersed in it, makes the content easy to bring up from memory.

This seems a bit like a mnemonic trick I've heard of: Imagine a house. Walk around through its rooms, and furnish it with the facts you want to remember. Maybe do something like imagining that the dining room table has Avogadro's number on it, shaped like an avocado. I don't know; I've never managed to use it successfully. But for this course I didn't work at. It just happened.

I think this is related to how easily many people - probably not all; I don't know - can

become immersed in a virtual world and identify with their avatars. For example, in real life I have a bit of vertigo. If I unexpectedly find myself near a sharp drop, or drive over a tall bridge, I feel queasy. In a virtual world, when I / my avatar goes near a cliff edge or over a flimsy edge - same thing. My stomach goes into knots. It doesn't matter that the whole thing is a digital construct, not "real." My unconscious processes don't care. As far as they're concerned, I, me, this person, is *living in* that world, and they react accordingly.

So I didn't *attend* that presentation, I *lived in it*. No wonder I remember it.

Compare this with the usual process of hypnotizing chickens with PowerPoint. No, don't bother; there's no comparison. Perhaps there is one useful analogy, though, one that points up a disadvantage to this technique today.

I tend to think of each of the settings used - skybox, Christmas, symphony - as each being analogous to a PowerPoint slide: It's an aid you construct to focus your audience on an aspect of your topic. One big difference that stands out to me is that it's easy to whip up a slide. Building a pocket universe, like those scenes in this course, is just too dang hard for the average presenter, given today's tools. Sorry, Lindens (owners of SL), I know your world is chock full of user-created content, and I've attended all the New Citizens' courses on building, animating, and so on, and I get it. And people obviously do it. But it's just not on a level with slide creation. People hire SL contractors to build stuff for them! Maybe if there were thousands of standard clipart-like objects to use (free! or very cheap, as for slides), and hundreds of template pocket universes to start from (free! or nearly), the situation would be different. Then maybe you could get 80% of the effect with 20% of the work required today.

This train of thought makes slide presentations done in virtual worlds seem perverse. It is, I guess, but they're all over the place. From the ones I've attended in SL, I find them a good halfway point between a webinar and actual physical presence. I do know that while attending them in-world, I'm far less likely to do email or chat with others; not so with webinars, which seem a fertile field for multitasking. Oh, and that's it's not just because my avatar will slump over, asleep, if I don't operate it. (At least it doesn't snore. (I know, it could.)) Slides in SL also do provide a way to transition from traditional web-based education to something in a virtual world. All your presentations can now be done in a corporate boardroom, or in a spaceship, or in a Tiki Hut on the edge of the sea, at sunset,

with a virtual Mojito in the hand of every avatar. (I've never understood the point of virtual libations, except as decoration.)

But something much better is possible, something that appears to harnesses our hindbrains directly: Living in a presentation. It cannot be done in two dimensions. You cannot even do it in real life. It's something virtual worlds are, uniquely, good for.

(By the way, no, I never did found out what the pig farm is about.)

## About Me



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[I'm an independent consultant, retired from being an IBM Distinguished Engineer in Austin, Texas. Most recently I've moved to Colorado and affiliated with Colorado State University as Research Faculty. I'm the author of "In Search of Clusters," still referred to as "the bible of clusters." I've worked on parallel computing for over 30 years, plus accelerators and appliances, chaired an InfiniBand subgroup, and hold over 30 patents in parallel computing and computer communications. I recently became affiliated with Colorado State University as Research Faculty. Twitter: GregPfister Facebook: Greg Pfister](#)

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