Second Life - An Alternative Way to Conduct Meetings and Conferences (Jul 08)
By Ellen Finkelstein

We all know the advantages of getting together to meet people in person: the opportunity to chat (in the traditional sense of the word) informally with others, exchange business cards, and get an up-close, face-to-face impression of others.

According to the Travel Industry Association, every year over 200,000 people travel on business in the United States alone. Many of these people are attending meetings and conferences.

The problems are clear too. We face a challenging economic climate - with the associated high costs of travel, limited time and resources as well as interests in minimizing environmental impact. But, what other viable options are available?

Many companies have tried video conferencing, but the technology has limitations. Buying the equipment is expensive and online services, while more reasonable, are also costly. Few services offer full video conferencing. In addition, most systems display only one or two people's faces at a time, making a truly interactive meeting challenging at best.

Especially when people have previously met in person, or they'll be attending classes that don't require a personal one-to-one connection, you may want to consider other options.

PresentationXpert publisher, Lisa Lindgren, joined author Ellen Finkelstein on a virtual trip into "Second Life" to learn about Virtualis. She offers her own "newbie" observations for those of you who have not yet ventured into this virtual world.

Alternatives are available - see what are the kids doing?
Do you have children who are into gaming? Perhaps you're a gamer. If so, you're probably familiar with massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs).
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively_multiplayer_online_role-playing_game) In these games, a large number of people play online at one time, adopting an avatar, which is a visual representation of the player. You can customize your avatar to look like yourself, or, more often, the way you'd like to look!

Gamers in online games talk to each other (either by typing or by talking into a headset) and can have complex social interactions. They can, and often do, work together in teams to accomplish a goal, such as a quest, in a game.

Lisa: This is what Ellen had first explained to me about Second Life; that it was really easy, especially for anyone who had done any online gaming. Well, being a baby boomer, who is not exactly at the younger end of that age spectrum, I know nothing about online gaming, just one of many technological aspects of popular culture that have totally passed me by. And thus I approached Second Life with some trepidation.

How about multiplayer online meetings?
You might be thinking that MMORPGs could be adapted for business use, and you'd be right. Let me introduce you to Second Life (www.secondlife.com), a multiplayer online world that isn't a game at all. It's free to enter and there you can meet others, through their avatars, meet, talk, make presentations and share ideas.

Although Second Life is free, you can purchase virtual land and create your own world, keeping it private or making it public, as you choose. Second Life has its own currency and exchange rate with U.S. dollars. Many businesses have a presence in Second Life and there's even a virtual embassy for Sweden. At least 25 colleges have classrooms there (http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life:_Universities_and_Private_Islands).

Lisa: The use by higher education is what first got me interested in Second Life. I attended a presentation given by Sarah Robbins from Ball State University about her experience in running her lab in Second Life. She said that one of the challenges is that her students get so engrossed that they forget to go to their next class!

So how do you get started?

The first step is to go to www.secondlife.com and sign up. During that process, you have to create your
avatar, or “other-self” to represent you in Second Life - and choose a name. You can choose virtually anything at all for your avatar’s first name, but you must select from a list provided to you for your second name. If you just try to add your regular first name to one of the options, often you will find that it is already taken.

I have two suggestions; the first is courtesy of Ellen’s experience. Simply contract together your regular first and last names with a capital letter beginning your second name in the middle. That pretty much takes care of your first name already being taken. Then, I stumbled upon a little trick when I really didn’t like any of the last names offered. If you refresh your screen, you’ll get some new last names to choose from. Many will be the same, but there will always be a few new ones. Just keep trying it until you find one that you like.

Can we get professional?
Specifically, I’d like to introduce you to Virtualis, the conference center in Second Life run by professional meeting planners. It’s owned and created by Dan Parks, President of Corporate Planners Unlimited, Inc. and a member of MPI (Meeting Professionals International) and several other meeting, conference, and travel-related organizations. Working closely with Dan is Gloria Nelson, CSEP (Certified Special Events Professional), who has her own event design and meeting management company, Gloria Nelson Event Design, LLC. Several other people are involved with programming, scripting, and designing.

The image above shows Lisa and Ellen “meeting” outside Virtualis in “Second Life.”

Over the last couple of years, Dan and his team have built a full-fledged conference center that can hold many types of events. You’ll find both traditional and outrageously creative meeting places. The facility can be used for conferences, meetings, parties -- practically any type of get together you can think of.

At this point, I should let the pictures do the talking, so here are some screenshots.

Lisa: That is my avatar with the long hair. I took most of the screen shots so you are getting the perspective of what I was actually seeing on my computer screen, as well as a sense of the accessibility of the technology.
A classroom or break-out room. Each table has its own virtual laptop computer.

The ballroom, with more formal seating. Because the décor is virtual, Virtualis can change its look with a couple of clicks. So you can choose formal or informal, auditorium-style seating or round-table seating. If you want, you can commission your own look.

Lisa: The final step before you can actually experience Second Life is to download the client software, which lives on your computer. You launch it, sign in and are immersed in this visually rich environment.
The trade show floor. Booths can include a screen that links to Web sites.

Outside one of the main buildings in Virtualis

**Real presentations**
You probably want to know how the business of meetings happens in Virtualis. The truth is, it happens in much the same way as in live meetings. For presentations, someone (that is, someone’s avatar) stands up front and talks. The person may deliver a PowerPoint presentation, although the technology is slightly different. The presenter can leave the stage and walk among the audience, if desired, just like in a live presentation.
Here I discuss my signature slide on tell ‘n’ show.

Users can zoom in and out, and change the camera angle, in order to view the slides as desired.

When it’s time for questions and answers, the audience can simply ask a question verbally (which requires a headset), or type it into a chat box. Everyone hears the question and the presenter can then answer the question. It’s easy to start a discussion as well. This capability makes a virtual meeting more spontaneous and effective for interaction than a video conference. And audience members can stand up while speaking and, with some instruction, perform gestures that help make interaction more meaningful and realistic. For example, typing /clap in the chat box generates a clapping gesture; the audience can use this gesture to applaud the presenter!

Integrate the real with the virtual
Using Second Life’s live video-streaming capability, a conference planner is able integrate a live conference or meeting with one in Virtualis? You would videotape the live conference and connect it to a Web-based URL, much the same way that a Web cam works. Virtualis representatives can provide you with the instructions you need to accomplish this.

Attendees in Virtualis need to install the free Quicktime player, set their preferences to enable video, and then click a button on the screen to play the streaming video. Live music works similarly. The video appears on a screen, as you see in this screenshot. In this way, attendees in Virtualis can see what’s happening at the live conference.
The screen is showing live video stream.

It’s even easier to send the video the opposite way. You can easily show attendees at the live conference what’s happening in Virtualis by simply entering Second Life, going to Virtualis, and displaying your computer monitor on a large screen with an LCD projector. In this way, the two groups see each other and feel even more ‘connected.’

**What about fun and socializing?**
Even entertainment is possible, if you want to schedule evening activities in Virtualis. Using streamed music, it’s easy to create a party. Avatars can even dance!

Virtualis can arrange for fireworks, a roof-top virtual special event with skydiving, or a team-building scavenger hunt, to name some options. Obviously, the possibilities are endless.

**How about the food?**
From the organizer’s side, there’s a big savings because the virtual attendees don’t need to be fed. This savings can go towards the cost of videotaping the conference and renting the space in Virtualis.

From the side of the attendees, creating a sense of a conference is important. For example, if they stay at their desk at work, they’ll be constantly interrupted by co-workers, supervisors, etc. If a company is sending several employees to the conference via Second Life, a helpful approach would be to put them in a conference room so that they’re away from the daily flow of work. And then, why not provide them with food during breaks? Virtualis does offer virtual food and drinks, however, which is fun and calorie-free.

**Training the attendees**
Second Life is fairly easy to navigate, but many people will need a little time to adjust. Virtualis representatives can provide a quick learning session and is expert at explaining the necessities to first-time attendees. For example, they’ll instruct attendees to mute their mikes during a presentation, much like attendees would do at a Web seminar.

*Lisa:* Second Life does make it easy, even the first time. Once you launch the software and sign in, you arrive at Orientation Island, which is totally designed to help newbies learn how to navigate their avatars and how to interact with the Second Life world.

There are several tutorials that you walk through, ensuring that you learn the basics, and yes, that you learn to fly. Anyone else you encounter there is also just learning, so fear of public embarrassment is eliminated.
After the tutorials, you are encouraged to go to Help Island where there are host and hostess avatars to answer questions and speed your progress along.

**What are the economics?**
Let's work out a sample situation to see how the numbers would look for a conference organizer. Of course, there are many variables, but this example should give you a feel for some of the cost-saving opportunities.

Let's say that you’re holding a 3-day conference that usually attracts about 300 attendees, and you’re charging $1,000 per person. The hotel costs $150 per day. Since people need to come the night before and many stay over the last night as well, we'll assume 4 nights which is $600. Airfare is $400 for most people (probably more, but that number is easy to work with). By saving hotel and airfare costs, people save half the cost of the conference.

Most people like to travel to conferences if they can, so we’ll hope that you don’t lose any significant number of attendees who come to the live conference. But let’s assume that 10 additional people come. Mostly, they’ll come to save the $1,000, but perhaps one or two will sign up because they’ll save the travel time or for the novelty of a virtual conference. That’s $10,000 additional fee money.

Out of that $10,000 you’ll need to pay the following additional costs:

- Videotaping to streaming video: $3,000 (estimated)
- An MC in Virtualis: $1,500 (estimated, optional)
- Virtualis rental cost for 1 room plus social/networking space for 3 full days (for 50-100 guests): $2,500

The cost adds up to $7,000, which gives you a profit of $3,000. Even more, because you save the cost of feeding these attendees, as I mentioned earlier. Not bad for offering attendees an exciting new option. Of course, you could spend more money in Virtualis by renting the dance floor for an evening, or adding more space or activities. The more people you can attract, the better the result.

**Getting started**
Given the economic climate and the importance of going green, if you organize meetings or conferences, consider checking out Virtualis as an alternative way to conduct meetings. If interested, visit [www.virtualiscenter.com](http://www.virtualiscenter.com), which highlights the April grand opening of Virtualis.

Virtual, 3D conferencing is definitely a new concept and people will need some time before they become completely comfortable with it. In my experience, people feel awkward at first, and then fall in love with it. While they’re learning, they’re having lots of fun because it seems like a game.

Virtualis (and Second Life in general) is an incredibly rich environment, with lots to experience and explore. It is a viable alternative to real-life expensive, time-consuming meetings and worth exploring. **Lisa:** The rich virtual environment goes a long way in keeping your remote audience engaged in the presentation, rather than checking their e-mail or attending to other demands. While it’s not for everyone and not for every occasion, Second Life does seem to foster the personal contact that you would get in a real setting, and Virtualis is set up and ready to accommodate presenting your message.

**About the author:**
Ellen Finkelstein is the author of *How to Do Everything with PowerPoint 2007 (and 2003), 101 Tips Every PowerPoint User Should Know,* and *Powerpoint for Teachers: Dynamic Presentations and Interactive Classroom Projects.* She has written numerous articles on PowerPoint for magazines and Web sites. Her [Web site](http://www.ellenfinkelstein.com) offers the free PowerPoint Tips Newsletter; sign up at [www.ellenfinkelstein.com/submit.html](http://www.ellenfinkelstein.com/submit.html).

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