Living Structures in Second Life Virtual Worlds Projects

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Since I was a graduate student, I have been fascinated with models and simulations as ways to work out solutions to real world problems. I felt that "people were part of the system". Although I earned degrees in physics and systems engineering, in my corporate career I became interested in organization development and teambuilding.

I saw that projects succeeded or failed, not just on whether they were well funded or had cool technologies, but whether the PEOPLE worked well together. In Virtual Reality environments like Second Life, it is so interesting to connect with people and then use the tools to build things together. You learn new ways to cooperate (or in some cases, new ways to have "drama"!)

In Second Life I am an independent consultant. I try to keep some key focus accounts with large scope, like Dublin in Second Life, because they break new ground for lots of innovations. Having a good client is priceless. I have ideas - too many sometimes – and it helps to find people with complementary interests so that some focus can occur. I consult not just on the build of a new simulation, but on the operation of the build and its financial sustainability after it is completed.

I am particularly interested in "living structures" - ones that people visit a lot. I find that what attracts people regularly to sims (simulators) in Second Life are: 1. Other people, and 2. Interesting "stuff" that they never heard of or saw before. Whether it's a sim with information displays and walk-through builds, or live music and social events, it must have advertisements in media and by word of mouth. Successful projects require a substantial ongoing component of events and communications past the actual building. Otherwise, they become "ghost sims" (like "ghost towns"): pretty to look at but empty.

I contrast "Concept Sim", which has exhibits added every few months, to "Entertainment Sim", which has hosted events every few days. Dublin in Second Life is very definitely an Entertainment Sim. It is first of all a visually interesting place to visit. It is photorealistic, complex, and three-dimensionally immersive. Many new registrants to Second Life are brought there by experienced friends.

But what keeps visitors coming back, after the novelty of the LOOK wears off, are the variety of experiences available in the sim. These include particularly the social events where people from all over the world may chat with each other any time of the day. Also included are shopping, concerts, and shows, all watched over by a staff trained to keep energy "pepped up" and to resolve any frictions between residents.

Events are different than Building. There is a market for a full schedule of events but it takes time and staff to organize and put on the events. This requires money and training beyond the scope of the build cost. I learned this with Dublin while putting on daily quality events. Whether it is a dance, a concert, or a class, it takes logistics to put on a good show and promotion to have people be there.

The shops and homes in Dublin in SL are part of the living architecture, as are the streets. You need to find a good variety of products and services that are visually interesting for "window shopping" and attractive enough for people to buy. That way both the shop owners stay and the visitors are entertained. People also love to drive or fly around the simulation and I have seen more than one police role play in progress with yellow tape marking off an "accident scene". Truly, people entertain people best.

The interesting thing about virtual reality is its interaction with "real" reality. Each enhances the other and both end up richer. Virtual reality starts out to emulate real things. In doing so it is like art. When making a painting you cannot recreate the real thing so you instead create a new thing that has the essence. When art has succeeded in creating a new essence, it gives something back to the real world. When new things created in virtual reality succeed in being cool and different, people go back to real life to tell others about it!

I find that I prefer more what I call "3D" (three dimensional) builds of structures. I have seen a lot of "one flat prim with one flat texture on it" work. It looks like children's play blocks and does not have a convincing depth or solidity. It feels too "light". I find also that I prefer what I call "organic" layouts of roads and landscapes. I have seen a lot of "perfectly rectilinear" designs where everything is at right angles and aligns North-South and East-West. They feel too "square".

I love seeing good, detailed, three dimensional modeling using a clever combination of solid prims (primitive objects), on top of which have been added convincing texture images that are scaled accurately on all visible sides. Now you have a truly convincing and even inspiring combination. It is very much "trompe-l'oeil" (deception of the eye), yet convincing. It is, in the best sense of the word, a "caricature" (deliberate simplification): it shows the key essences of the thing modeled. It is a three dimensional caricature in virtual reality!

Regarding "ghost sims", I am reminded of my experiences with the classic SimCity city building game when it first came out. I loved that game! It was visual and interactive, yet based firmly on underlying social and economic dynamic equations. If only I had had that game when I was a graduate student!

I soon discovered from Sim City that there could be a lot of empty builds: places where homes are too far from work or shopping, for example; or where things are overcrowded. A good city design attracted and KEPT the sim citizens. In looking at how well the game emulated reality, I looked in my own neighborhood. Where I live now, a suburb of Houston, I see the SAME thing: commercial areas built but empty or less than 10% occupied. Yucky! Another discovery was how dynamic a social–economic simulation can be. A full area could become empty and vice versa.

It was a tricky balancing problem to have "living architecture" in SimCity. In many ways, Second Life shows the same dynamics except with REAL people, not computer simulations, behind each avatar. Many times a new build has a big kickoff event and lots of people come. Then nothing further is scheduled and the attraction of the novelty of the build wears off. Soon it is empty.

The trick to holding daily quality events that attract people includes building a staff of "people who like people" and of "people who like logistics" (not always the same thing!). The trick to build interesting original structures in virtual reality, whether inspired by real locations or the imagination or both, is to find people who love those structures and who have, or are willing to learn, the modeling and texturing skills in SL.

I think of art as putting things together in a special way that the artist sees in a kind of "channeling" from what does not yet exist to reality. There is an art of putting people together just as there is an art of putting materials together or ideas. I am constantly working with clients, staff and other developers; doing coaching, projects and networking. There is more than enough opportunity in SL to do cool things.

Right now I am working on a new project where we are again approaching the design from the total sim perspective. Many people build "on the fly" and fit it in the sim. New tools we are using include elevation

modeling to show the fit of the structures within the land itself. Land editing tools are tricky to use well. Things end up looking like combinations of squares on a flat plain. We are attempting to create an integration of roundedness and straightness; also a feeling of fullness and richness. In fact the owner's words are "nostalgia and reminiscence".

I have studied other disciplines in addition to science, engineering and teambuilding. The more people-oriented they are, the "messier" they seem to be: less of firm rules and more of flexible guidelines. The best way I know to assess a build in Second Life is to go there and get the feel of it. There will be a feel associated with the shape of the land. There will be a feel associated with the look and design of the structures. There will be a feel associated with who else is there visiting along side you. Does it feel open or closed? Does it feel welcoming or exclusive? Does your energy go up or down? Does it pique your curiosity and make you want to dive in?

A fascinating illusion I have seen over and over with well designed sims is that they seem somehow LARGER than other sims. They are the same size in dimensions (256m x 256m) and content limits (15,000 prims). But "experientially" they are larger: there is one thing after another that draws your interest, day after day. Just as the experience of time disappears when one is "in the zone" (fully engaged), so disappears the experience of spatial constraint.

What we learn in Second Life does not always translate diREctly to real life. But there is undeniably something learned that benefits us all.

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