# The Promise of Virtual Worlds in Global Justice Education

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## Introduction

Virtual worlds are emerging frontiers for experiential learning and the teaching of lawyering skills and perspectives. They also offer specialized opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration with people with internet access from around the world. With proper training, planning and integration with other Web 2.0 platforms and traditional class-room methods, law clinics may make effective use of virtual worlds to augment real-world problem-solving and justice initiatives as well as to enhance student learning and reflection about issues of local as well as global concern.

## Objective

To study and test potential applications of virtual worlds to real-world justice initiatives in legal education.

## Methods

• Author created avatar and became resident of virtual world Second Life in July 2006.

• An initial exploratory phase was conducted, involving participation and observation of real-life and virtual teaching applications, investigation of science, arts, and cultural applications, and adaptation to unique cultural and technical features of Second Life.

• Interviews and dialogue with other online residents utilizing virtual worlds for teaching, human rights and social justice education and advocacy, scientific, business, artistic, and other real-world purposes were conducted.

• Networking and collaboration took place with persons accessing Second Life from points across the world: ideas were exchanged, technical expertise shared, and virtual land and class-room space designed and shared.

• An initial teaching online mediation demonstration was conducted in a first-year Alternative Dispute Resolution class in Spring 2007.

• Based upon the results of this class, a Virtual Mediation Clinic class was created and taught over a two-year period, Spring 2008 & 2009.

• The teaching demonstrations were evaluated and student research and comments analyzed regarding the effectiveness and limitations of the virtual world experience and suggestions for further teaching.

• Simulated role-plays and class-room discussion conducted via student-created avatars in Second Life formed the basis for early teaching experiments.

• Investigation and application to real-client clinical program is now in progress.

## Teaching Illustrations

Virtual classroom and mediation role play:





## Results



• Teaching initiatives conducted in Second Life demonstrated the effectiveness of virtual worlds' potential to enhance skills-based law teaching, particularly with respect to conducting simulations and role-play.

• Virtual-world teaching also demonstrated increased student engagement and interest in big-picture issues about globalization and e-commerce, online dispute resolution, and the role of law and dispute resolution systems on- and off-line in ordering human behavior, solving complex social problems, and resolving disputes.

• Distance-learning interactions may be augmented in virtual worlds.

• Virtual worlds offer cross-cultural experiences similar to a study-abroad programs, causing students to compare and contrast on- and off-line methods of interaction, communication via an avatar, verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional expression, proxemics, the role of race, gender and other social demographics on human interaction, and interpretation of context.

• Many entities are utilizing virtual worlds for real-world social justice organizing, education and advocacy as well as problem-solving and dispute-resolution work.

• It is common for such work to enhance other offline and Web 2.0 initiatives.

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• Work in virtual worlds requires considerable adaptation and investment of time and/or financial resources in advance of planned classes or activities.

• Virtual land and "class-room" space must be purchased, leased and/or constructed, participants must have orientation and training to basic tools of communication, movement, adornment, geo-cultural norms.

• Virtual safety protocols must be implemented consistent with provider Community Standards and Terms of Service and independent user safety and security standards.

• As with other uses of technology, technical capacity issues and internet connectivity must be investigated by each participant and some trouble-shooting and lapses should be expected.

• Other considerations may include privacy, security of investment in private corporate entity, liability, and professional ethics & multi-jurisdictional practice rules.

## Virtual World Features & Tools

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| Ability to create & alter environment | Global networking opportunities |
| Communication via avatar | Communities of practice, i.e., educators, |
| Multi-layered communication | non-profits, social justice advocates |
| Text & voice; individual & group | Elimination of traditional social indicators, |
| "Face-to-face" & remote chat | i.e., race, gender, age, class, education |
| Simultaneous or asynchronous | Integration of "real" & virtual experience |

## Global Justice Applications

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|---|---|
| Collaboration & problem-solving | In-world justice & democratization |
| Global education & awareness campaigns | Design/testing of planned real-world events |
| Community building | Empirical research |
| Organizing and recruitment | Simulation & role-playing |
| Information exchange | Visual media campaigns: machinima, etc. |
| Strategy development | Wiki-style citizen input for social reform |
| Fundraising | Petition campaigns |

*"'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.' - Margaret Mead" (SL Left Unity Feminist Network, Group Profile)*