



New Study Shows Virtual Worlds Strong on ROI for Training and Collaboration

Next week Forterra will release a white paper detailing the results of a joint experiment with members of the MASIE Center Learning Consortium on learning in virtual worlds. The two established a 3D sandbox for members to explore different use cases for virtual worlds. While the white paper outlines certain challenges to be met, the two final participants, Accenture and ACS Learning Services, both saw a great deal of promise. In particular, ACS plans to continue its experiment next month.

"What I think is going to be even more exciting is, I feel that what we did was replicate to a certain degree an instructor experience. In the collaborative environment, I feel the benefit is collaborative learning, almost like Harvard Business School classes," explained ACS Learning Strategist Caroline Avey. "They go out and find these answers and the facilitator will brief. We plan a trial of that in January."

While the purpose of the study was to examine employee development and training, one extra benefit of the process was identifying virtual worlds, specifically OLIVE, as a cost-effective, richer alternative to other methods of teleconferencing. Rather than simply dialing into a conference call or setting up elaborate and expensive telepresence systems, users can share a sense of presence from their own computers.

Table 1: Virtual Worlds Compared to Other Communication Technologies

	Annual Cost per User	Comments
Audio Conferencing	\$500 to \$1000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits: Familiar, easy to use, ubiquitous ▪ Challenges: More expensive than perception, poor participant attention span, challenging following discussion context, no display of data
Web Conferencing	\$30 to \$100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits: Familiar, easy to use, ubiquitous, inexpensive ▪ Challenges: Typically pay extra for conference call or audio VoIP services, poor participant attention span, challenging following discussion context, single media file presentation at a time
Virtual Worlds (Forterra's OLIVE)	\$60 to \$167	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits: Face-to-face like experience, multiple media file presentation, appeals to Internet generation ▪ Challenges: Larger client download, proven effectiveness, easy entry for employees
Video Conferencing & Telepresence	\$1000 +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits: Face-to-face like experience, integrates with IP Phone system for easy meeting scheduling and launching ▪ Challenges: High up front investment often \$Ms for network infrastructure and equipment, users required to visit installed sites
Travel	\$1000 +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits: Face-to-face meeting provides best overall experience ▪ Challenges: Highest ongoing cost, lost productivity due to travel time to destinations ▪ Assume 2 trips per year, \$500 per trip

The feel of location boosts learning engagement as well. It allows for what Avey called the "Aha! moments" of discovery and engagement.

"What's exciting to me is in the real world, if you did distance learning through some other standard format with slides or people listening, the percentage of people who will disengage is very high. In this environment people hung in there. You can tell, because the avatars start nodding off otherwise. To me the appeal is that everyone noted how quickly the hour went by," explained Avey. "You become engaged in the content. You become engaged with other people in the room. You're much more aware of the other participants than, say, in a standard broadcast-type media. There's much less distance, and you feel physically connected to these people. As a result, there's a sense of bonding."

One complaint pundits often have about virtual worlds as a training environment is the complicated nature of navigating the 3D environment. That's exacerbated, some say, by generation gaps. Younger users take to the systems due to their game-like natures, while older users, often in management, avoid them for the same reasons.

Avey, herself 52, says that the gap isn't as extreme as some think. More importantly, like any technology, if virtual worlds fill a training need, they'll be adopted.

"Think about cell phones: nobody used to have them. Now everyone has them. Cell phones met the need of immediate communication," she explained. "In the case of a 3D environment, what it offers over a 2D environment is the ability to have an interaction that's much more engaging. Why is World of Warcraft more fun than Monopoly?"

The problem is also diminished by repeated use and training. Prior to launching into training sessions, Forterra and ACS took users to a wide open space, a virtual desert with no distractions, and helped them adjust to their avatars and real-world headsets. The process takes under an hour.

"There is a learning curve, but having these people come back into the world, it goes much faster," said Avey. "There's almost this magic time where initially they're hesitant and then they really get used to it."

The white paper lays out similar instructions and tips for setting up effective virtual world training environments, and is well worth a read for anyone pitching or developing enterprise-level virtual worlds. All involved are still looking ahead, but the early trials and case studies are already showing strong results and, even better, solid ROI opportunities.

In fact, Forterra says its most advanced customer is planning to roll out OLIVE to its 70,000 employees in 2009. The company will employ the virtual world for five separate use cases, including replacing at least some conference calls with virtual meetings.

ACS Learning is also looking at other options.

"What we did was a proof of concept. It's taking a technology for a test drive and seeing how far you can push that technology on interactions," said Avey. "We made a laundry list of what we would hope to accomplish, everything from a presentation that might replace a WebEx environment to an 'Aha! moment' of two avatars interacting online in a client-customer relationship. The fact that we could have avatars do it and have learners observe was powerful."