March, 2012

Transforming Legal Education: Teaching Law in a Virtual World Environment

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jalae_ulicki/8/
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Introduction
John Donne (1572-1631, London, England) certainly wasn’t thinking about virtual worlds when he wrote his famous poem that begins “No man is an Island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main…” In 2003 Linden Labs launched their virtual world environment. It was a program that enabled users to interact on the internet with each other through avatars by simulating real life experience in a virtual world than in fact encompasses a lot of islands and pieces of property that can be purchased or rented. Since that time, Second Life has been used by educators and students to enhance student engagement in a visual platform that allows educators and students to simulate real-life experiences in an exciting new domain.

I have always wanted to buy an island, well I finally did – in Second Life – and I appropriately named it Blackacre.

I am currently the sole occupant although I have a vision that it will someday be occupied by my students as well.

21st Century Technology for 21st Century Students
There exists in law schools a critical need for a pedagogical transformation to provide students not only with a substantive education of the law, but also to provide them with opportunities to gain skills in a medium that will allow them to encounter real-life situational problems where they can develop skills in analyzing client circumstances, advocate on behalf of their interests, and produce quality work. In recent years law schools have used clinical programs and externships as a way to immerse students into such an environment. However as technology rapidly changes, law schools need to look at available 21st century technology and incorporate that technology into their programs to provide students with 21st century skills. I propose that we step out of the real world and step into the virtual world environment to teach with Avatars and focus our use on this medium for distance education courses.

The military who has long recognized the value of gaming as a learning tool has started extensive use of virtual worlds for education, training and virtual experience. The Air Force has launched MyBase, which they use for recruiting, training, education and operations while the National Guard is using Navy Undersea Warfare Center for distance-based education, training and collaboration.

The medical community has stepped into virtual world education as well. For example, the Greensboro Area Health Education Center worked on developing interactive neonatal device models and practical patient-monitoring exercises that would allow students to identify and practice the skills a pharmacist will need in a neonatal intensive care unit. Medical students at Imperial College London were treating virtual patients in Second Life where, in their full-service hospital, they would see patients, order X-rays, consult with colleagues and make diagnoses. The medical school was piloting the program because they a game-based learning program could be a stimulating change from lectures and textbooks.
Law schools have traditionally been slow on embracing change, but some schools have started looking at virtual world environments as a new medium for education. For example, New York Law School created a “Democracy Island” complete with a Supreme Court building and miniature models of urban neighborhoods. (Democracy Design Workshop 2006). My over-zealous vision for Blackacre was an environment in which to teach both property and real estate transactions. I envisioned creating simulations where students would acquire property through sale or negotiate for leases; meet with contractors and governmental agencies for zoning and use permits; deal with CC&R’s in their subdivisions; and face easement encroachments and title problems. Armed with my great idea, I assembled a team composed of a member of our IRC department and IT instructional designer and was now ready to build our school. Unfortunately, I soon found out that building the virtual world environment was much more difficult than building the idea for the distance education course component. To date, we have a building under construction but it is no where being usable but it is an idea in the making and a new virtual world to conquer.

Conclusion
Our team has discovered that, even though we recognize the potential for development of this idea, it will not become a reality without the assistance of architects, builders, and designers – all who can be employed on Second Life and paid with “Linden” dollars, the currency used on Second Life. But despite the difficulties encountered I’m not ready to abandon my island yet.

To experience our virtual world idea, access the following links:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL3D-59MbnY&feature=related

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFuNFRie8wA

http://secondlife.com/whatis/?lang=en-US#Education_&_Enterprise

http://homepages.uc.edu/secondlife2/

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