



Why Creativity Matters

A speech by Dr. Larry Johnson

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Good afternoon everyone.

As I look around this room, I see educators from across the globe — from Europe, Asia, Latin America, Australia, and of course all across the US and Canada. Each of you has made a journey to get here, and those stories are at the heart of why a gathering like this is so unique and memorable.

I'd love to know more about some of you — who has come the farthest to be here today? And how long have you been working in Second Life?

Each of you has made a journey to get here — I am fascinated by the stories I hear of how people came to be involved in virtual worlds. For many of us, myself included, the trip to SLCC is a pilgrimage.

It is a chance to be at the conceptual center of this virtual world and see the people whose work we admire in person, to talk with the *cognoscenti* and to see the movers and shakers of Second Life. They are all here, and that is an attraction.

More than that, though, I think we come here because it serves to affirm that what we are doing in Second Life is important.

I believe it is. I think it is vitally important, and that we — all of us here — are involved in an historic undertaking, one that we will look back on years from now as seminal and groundbreaking for its time.

I definitely feel I am on a journey, and have been for some time. The path that led me here today began in the fall of 2005. Research we were doing as part of the NMC's Horizon Project that year had indicated a sea change in the way educators were beginning to think and talk about gaming.

To gain a deeper understanding of it, the NMC held a conference on the general topic of educational gaming at Yale in October 2005. For someone who was not involved in gaming in any kind of personal way at the time, I was amazed. The atmosphere was thick with excitement; the rooms were filled to overflowing.

In November, the final topics for the 2006 Horizon Report were selected, and to no one's surprise, educational gaming was one of them. Our research indicated that interest in educational gaming was widespread, especially around the area of massively multiplayer spaces. The tone and substance of the dialog had changed — genuine interest had replaced skepticism; data and solid theoretical frameworks had begun to define the discussions.

It was clear to all of us at the NMC then we would make a substantive play in gaming. We began to look for a platform upon which we could do something both interesting and long term.

We looked at everything we could find — tools, games, game engines — even non-computer games. We quickly zeroed in on virtual worlds as the area we wanted to explore — they had all the excitement of the massively multiplayer space, but also it seemed clear something very very new was happening there.

We looked at all the various options that existed in virtual worlds at the time.

When we saw Second Life for the first time, on a tour of a very early version of Global Kids Island arranged by Barry Joseph, we knew we had our platform.

We instantly saw that something deeply compelling was happening there...not the least of which was the *economy*. That economy served many purposes, but the one that interested us the most was that it had allowed both the growth of a large and vibrant artisan culture, and a supporting ecosystem of developers and artists invested in building the world. Those artists and artisans were really, really talented, and produced a range of goods and services that boggled the mind.

It was clear, even then, that Second Life was home to an incredible culture focused on creativity and expression.

We embarked on a research project to learn more and get some “on the ground” experience. We knew we were neophytes — there was much we needed to simply learn — but we also knew there were things we needed to do if we were to be successful.

In January 2006, we set about doing all that. Back then, Second Life had just 150,000 residents.

We had an idea back then much like the ideas of many people who come into Second Life. Ours was to create the NMC Campus — a place where colleges and universities could experiment with classes, meetings, and explore how people might interact in a playful environment such as this. The project has grown like topsy since then of course — far beyond those humble beginnings.

The reasons it has grown at all has far less to do with what the NMC does than it has to do with the potential of creativity when it is unleashed and allowed to go where it will.

The original NMC Campus sim now sits in the center of a large and growing educational region — a land mass that with the campus and its university neighbors spans about 80 sims.

NMC Campus occupies somewhere around 60 of those, and somehow, we have grown to become the largest educational presence in Second Life by a fair margin. That did not happen because we willed it into place.

No, it was the result of something far more magical, and itself an indication of the importance of creativity to all of us and the work we do. There are now more than 70 colleges and universities that have set up a significant presence within the NMC Campus.

The community is growing just as much, and today the region is the hub for a continually expanding range of activities, events, classes, and demonstration projects.

The NMC organizes almost none of these. They are the work of the nearly 5,000 members of an incredible creative community — a community of which all of you are a part.

Who knew that the road we embarked back on that January day would lead to all this explosion of ideas, of art, of innovation in practice?

It's been quite a journey.

Those of you who are fans of the Matrix trilogy will remember the conversation in the first film where Morpheus gives Neo the choice of two pills, one red and one blue. If he took the blue pill, he'd wake up in his bed the next day, as if nothing had happened. If he took the red pill, however, he'd leave all he knew before and embark on a journey from which there was no return — a one-way trip down the rabbit hole that was the Matrix.

My choice that day in January 2006 was not framed with the same intensity as the one given Neo, but there is no doubt that I feel like I have followed a path down my own rabbit hole.

The world around me, and even my perception of it has been changed forever since I appeared on Orientation Island that day in rolled-up jeans, flip flops, and a t-shirt. My sense then though, was closer to that of Alice in Wonderland, when she encountered the Cheshire Cat:

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

We weren't mad of course. We saw instantly that something deeply compelling was happening here ... It was clear, even then, that Second Life was home to an incredible culture not only focused on, but actually based on creativity and expression.

When I began preparing these remarks back in June, the NMC was deep in planning for our recent *Symposium*. We had a vision in mind that reflected the sum of our collective experiences here in this virtual world. That vision centered on the notion of creativity. The images behind me, all drawn from this space, reflect that vision ... most of them are extraordinary — not because of the subject matter per se — but because they reflect expressions of creativity on so many levels.

And that leads me to what I want to talk about today ...

Creativity.

Since I began working in Second Life, I see creative potential everywhere — and the experiences I've had make me thirsty for even more.

There is a sea change happening across the globe in the way people think about creativity, one that has been coming for some time. It parallels the work all of us do, and I think it is useful to think about it.

Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist made a comment years ago that was most provocative at the time. It was a precursor to the work we see happening today around creativity.

Allow me to paraphrase his thoughts:

“The key question.” He said, “... isn’t “What fosters creativity?” It is — Why isn’t *everyone* creative? ... the question ought not be why do *some* people create — but why do so many people *not* create?”

If Dr. Maslow were here with us today, I’d answer that it is because they’ve not been given the *license* to create — and neither has creativity’s cousin, innovation, been encouraged much at all.

Sir Ken Robinson, the noted British educational provocateur, thinks that as a society, we waste creativity systematically. I think he is dead on with that. He articulates his perspective a video we have playing here at the conference in Schroeder-Krasner Hall...

His view is that we boil the creativity out of people as children. In school. We literally punish them for straying outside the lines, when outside the lines is the very place where creativity lives.

He tells a story that I’d like to share — one he tells ever so much better than I can, but it is worth telling over and over and over.

It is a story of a little girl who could not sit still. She constantly fidgeted and moved about. Her motions were a disruption to her classmates, and she found herself in trouble all the time.

Today that child would likely be diagnosed as ADD and medicated.

Back then, however, she got sent to the principal’s office...and after a few of those visits, her parents were called in. The principal talked briefly with the 3 of them, and then asked her parents to step out of the room with him.

As they left, he leaned over and switched on the radio to a music station.

They made small talk for a few minutes, and then he brought them over to the door to look through the glass into his office ...

You can guess what they saw — the girl was up out of her chair, swaying to the music...her body interpreting the sounds from the radio instinctively in her motion.

And the principal said, “I know what the problem is with your daughter... ”

“She’s a dancer...

“Get her to a dancing school.”

The girl was Gillian Lynne. She grew up to be one of the most successful choreographers in the world, with a host of productions to her credit, including *Cats*, and *Phantom of the Opera* What that principal knew is this: creativity matters.

Had that girl been put on Ritalin, we'd have lost one of the great artists of our age.

The issue that we've been struggling with as a society is that we think creativity is something only special people have. While creativity is surely special, I think it is also ubiquitous — and like the young Gillian, it just needs fertile ground in which to flower.

How many of us want to be that flower? To grow, innovate, create?

I think that all of us do — on some level, in some way.

It is part of us, how we express ourselves — indeed, it is part of our very being. Our humanity.

In the description to these remarks, I asked several questions —

What is it about these environments that are producing the phenomenal growth seen over the last few years?

What is it that makes people willing, even eager, to spend hours online interacting in virtual space?

I think the answer to both questions is clear — and the same. It meets people's deep need to express themselves, and that need is a powerful one. Virtual worlds in general, and Second Life in particular make it easy to express ourselves, and to do so in so many fantastic ways. And — the best part — is that these new forms of self expression are surprisingly natural and accessible.

We are here in the midst of a huge new store of fertile ground for creativity and innovative ideas. The pictures behind me are examples of that — the range and scope of expression possible in here is truly astounding.

Think of all the ways people are expressing themselves in this space:

- Their appearance and the choices and expression of forms that they choose. Just look at range here in this audience. One of my favorite avatars is a hopping plywood cube. The owner says it is perfect for quietly lurking.
- Their places — homes and institutional settings. Take a tour of the NMC's educational communities, or the Info Islands...the range of styles is incredible.
- Their work
- The ways they gather
- The things they do
- The ways they interact
- The list goes on and on and on.....

Creativity matters. It allows people to invest themselves — and the results of those investments are exploding in Second Life.

In the almost 20 months since we started here in January 2006, we have tried to listen and observe, to experiment, and to learn.

And we have. We've learned a lot. And we plan to continue doing that.

I opened my comments today with a reflection on my own journey, and lately I have been spending a lot of time thinking about the journey that new faculty and educators undertake to come into a space like this — and especially the processes they go through to become facile with the space. The NMC is working hard on a comprehensive orientation experience for educators and thinking about their journey has been an illuminating part of the process.

Consider the space that is Second Life.

Tens of thousands of people are online at any given moment.

At this scale, the macro-characteristics of the collective inhabitants begin to mimic real societies in many ways. Inhabitants form themselves into alliances, affinities, families, and peer groups. Cultural mores and expectations can be very sophisticated, and socialization very much involves the learning processes of observation, reflection, and assimilation.

I mentioned Maslow earlier, and in interpreting the learning behaviors of a new entrant to a virtual world, we've found his Hierarchy of Needs to be illuminating. As you will remember, Maslow's pyramid places basic human needs — in real life, these correspond to basic physiological needs — at the most fundamental level. These needs tend to be met before others are considered.

For a new faculty or staff member entering Second Life, the groups we have studied most with our observations, there are few physiological needs. Avatars do not need food, air, water, or warmth — but there is an almost universal concern for one's safety and security.

New virtual world residents typically do not need to fear for their physical safety, of course, but they are extremely interested in learning about any potential dangers or embarrassments in the new world, and how to avoid them.

As we all know, in Second Life, one assumes a new identity upon entering, and leaves all the hard-earned trappings of academia behind.

This is a big deal, and that lack of an identity anchor coupled with the lack of basic skills and knowledge leads to a predictable feeling of being set adrift far from shore. We think it is easily the most critical point in the orientation process, and the point where it is easiest for someone to simply decide this is not for him or her.

The good news is that those sorts of concerns also provide a strong impetus to align with mentors, and to form friendships and relationships, a need reflected in the "Love/Belonging" level of Maslow's pyramid. Second Life facilitates this by making it easy to track people who have agreed to be your "friend's list," to tell when they are online, and to communicate with them in real time.

It is important for us who have been here for a while to offer friendship, to serve as mentors, to help newcomers — and we do. That is one of the things about Second Life that I love. That is the cultural norm — and its effects are powerful.

A simple example that newcomers universally appreciate knowing even if they choose not to use it is how to use the profile to communicate their real-world expertise — and to learn similar details about others. For example, few newcomers know you can post a weblink in your profile. I use mine to link to my online bio.

It is not news that the most effective learning (for better or worse) tends to come from experiences and interactions with one's friends and social groups — whether in real life or within our virtual world.

These interpersonal relationships are observable everywhere in Second Life — indeed they are quite the norm — and it is extremely common to see people interacting in ways that tend to increase the skill levels of everyone in the social group.

Because these worlds not only allow, but encourage rich forms of expression through the provision of tools and powers, residents communicate not only with text or voice, but also with objects, video, images, and through demonstrations.

The active learning mode of “speaking” translates in these spaces as “showing,” since one can communicate literally within three dimensions, using texture, form, sight, and sound.

Informal social interactions are powerful motivators for learning, because most people involved in these groups either are operating or are poised to operate at the fourth level of the hierarchy, “Esteem.” It is through social interaction that one's confidence in the virtual world is reinforced, and through which the virtual world's cultural norms for respect and achievement are communicated.

At this level, discovery and interaction is highly encouraged within social groups, and learning progresses very quickly and efficiently. One ceases to consider him or herself a *noob*, as new residents are often called in such spaces, and the focus of the learning shifts to becoming not merely competent, but expert.

The dynamics of the social and learning forces combine to make the experience consistently engaging and rewarding, increasing the desire to explore further, share more experiences, and gain expertise.

This is the sweet spot in Second life.

Students who reach this level are ready to tackle significant projects, as most of the impediments to their learning within the space have been minimized. Until an educator reaches this level, it is very difficult for him or her to visualize learning applications that are truly reflective of the potential of the space.

Indeed, most initial faculty efforts are attempts to replicate teaching approaches used in real world classes. This phenomenon is seen repeatedly, as virtually all teachers and trainers initially refine their skills in the virtual world by learning how to show slides or videos, how to create handouts, replicate posters and books, and the like.

When still new to this space, for example, teachers generally go through an almost sequential process of “retrofitting” teaching strategies into the new environment.

Approaches that are clearly modeled on common classroom practice may not make any particular use of the affordances of a virtual setting, but they are indicative of the typical new faculty member’s own learning cycle as he or she goes through a period of discovering how the virtual world may be similar or different to the real one. They are mileposts on the way to understanding how to maximize the potential of this space.

Journeys are important, and while we each follow our own path, we are also all fellow travelers...

We’ve been learning much on our journey at the NMC, and we look forward to learning much much more. The full scope of the research the NMC has been doing and plans for the future is a conversation for another time, but as I bring these remarks to a close, I want to summarize three key things that we think are vitally important insights into Second Life culture.

We think these are the drivers that are fueling the tremendous growth and interest in Second Life, and each is critical to understanding what is happening here:

- **Second Life is inherently social.** More than anything, it is the simple set of social networking tools that makes this virtual world platform enjoy an unparalleled success. These tools are also fueling a similar explosion on the flat web, and the growth of Second Life cannot be separated from the phenomenon that is powering MySpace, YouTube, and other flat-web mega-hits.
- **The world of Second Life is 100% user-built.** Residents are immensely proud of this fact. It adds an unpredictable dynamicism that is at the core of Second Life’s popularity. It’s not unlike another hugely successful network —the World Wide Web — which is also based on a simple set of richly expressive tools. Indeed, ...
- **Second Life is *inherently* expressive.** The platform not only allows the use of rich media, but fosters a blending of artistic elements that plays out across every dimension of the space. It has been the springboard for entirely new forms of media, art, and performance. If you have not yet, please make time to see the exhibition by DanCoyote Antonelli that opened last night on Arts and Letters. It is the best example of this that I can imagine.

I believe, deeply, that these are the factors that make Second Life such a place of boundless creativity.

The tools are here, the media available are richly expressive, and the residents are absolutely receptive to seeing what can be done with them.

It is a learning space like no other we’ve seen. A creative space where a dancer can dance, a sculptor can create, and a teacher can teach in ways that are only bounded by his or her imagination.

A space where attempts do not have to be successful to be seen as valuable — a place where the journey is paramount. Discovery is the destination.

A space where it is the natural state of affairs for people to learn from and share with each other.

A space where creativity matters.

My time with you is almost gone, and as we look forward to following the paths our own journey's take us from this place, I want to thank you for joining me today and for being part of this most unique gathering.

I'd like to leave you with two things before I go.

The first is a movie. A machinima actually, created by an amazingly creative faculty member in the UK, who was inspired by one genius to create his own masterpiece. I think it is an excellent example of what unbounded creativity can produce.

(See the movie at <http://s4.video.blip.tv/0440000590920/RobbieDingo-WatchTheWorlds144.mov>)

The second is a hope I'd like to encourage among all of us working here.

Let us make our places in Second Life be places where creativity flourishes. Let us share what we learn, and what we create wherever and whenever we can.

And finally, let us celebrate the possible even as we reach for the impossible.

Thank you.



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View a 5-min video about the NMC's virtual campus in Second Life:
<http://media.nmc.org/sl/video/seriously-engaging.mov>