



Why Creativity Matters

A speech by Dr. Larry Johnson

Symposium on Creativity in Second Life
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Good afternoon everyone, and thank you for joining us at the Symposium for Creativity in Second Life.

When we conceived this event back in June, 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 is what I want to talk about today ...

Creativity.

I see creative potential everywhere — and I want to see even more.

Fortunately, there is a sea change happening across the globe in the way people think about creativity, one that has been coming for some time. 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

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.....

Please make time to go see Robinson's remarks in Schroeder-Krasner Hall — the video is from the 2006 TED conference, and it is just excellent.

Schroeder and Krasner, by the way, were the creative genius's behind MP3. That building is on the SW side of the island, just down the way from the giant conference programs.

All of the spaces here are named after creative genius's — we asked the NMC members to help us identify the giants of new media, and so you'll see the history of it as you travel from Babbage Amphitheatre where we are gathered, to Rosendale Hall and Cooper Coliseum on the opposite corner of the island.

Creativity matters.

The work of these people, from Philo T Farnesworth, the inventor of the television to Vint Cerf, whose work led to today's Internet. These are the people who made this kind of gathering even possible.

One wonders what experiences they had in school ... I suspect they were as lucky as Gillian.

The journey that led me here today began back in January 2006, when Second Life had just 150,000 residents. The NMC had just begun to explore the potential of games for learning, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.

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. Today, we are sitting on a land mass by the campus and its university neighbors that spans 78 sims.

NMC Campus occupies somewhere around 60 of those sims, 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 nearly 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.

In the almost 20 months since then, we have tried to listen and observe, to experiment, and to learn.

The full scope of the research the NMC has been doing 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 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 the rest of the week of this Symposium on Creativity, 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. You can find it at <http://s4.video.blip.tv/0440000590920/RobbieDingo-WatchTheWorlds144.mov>

The second is a hope for this week and beyond.

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.



Laurence F. Johnson, Ph.D. (Larry) is Chief Executive Officer of the New Media Consortium (NMC), an international consortium of nearly 250 world-class universities, colleges, museums, research centers, and technology companies. The NMC dedicates itself to finding ways for new technologies to inspire, energize, stimulate, and support learning and creative expression. He is an acknowledged expert on the effective application of new media in many contexts, and has worked extensively to build common ground among universities, museums, and research centers across North America and in more than a dozen other countries.

The New Media Consortium

sparking innovative learning and creativity

2499 S Capital of Texas Hwy
Building A, Suite 202
Austin, TX 78746-7762

tel 512 445-4200
fax 512 445-4205

email johnson@nmc.org
web www.nmc.org

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