

## When Worlds Collide

**T**he emergence of virtual worlds, synthetic worlds, and immersive worlds is a social and technical movement of great importance. Although personally I have yet to be moved to construct a virtual mini-me, I recognize that these environments will become incredibly rich and nuanced—nearly real, in fact. And I realize that the eventual near-reality of these environments has profound implications for higher education.

Colleges and universities are carbon creatures. If we ask donors to endow ideas, they tell us that they'll endow buildings. We boast about how many assignable square feet of space we are constructing or where we can place the next building designed by the latest famous architect. Institutional leaders write their legacies in bricks and mortar. And our carbon footprint can be magnificent!

Still, trends like climate change, rising energy costs, high real-estate costs, security concerns, telecommuting, telelearning, telemedicine, and global research collaborations are changing our thinking about the role, nature, and importance of built physical spaces on campuses today. In addition, the rapid emergence of collaborative infrastructures, high-speed networks, rich digital simulations, and immersive software environments is causing a reconsideration of built physical environments as places to live, work, and learn in higher education.

Can we ride this wave? My conversations with CIOs today revolve around what I refer to as “the CIO’s new friends.” Our “best buddies” are the general

counsel, the director of internal audit, the chief of police, and the director of public affairs. Huh? What happened? It seems that overnight, CIOs awakened to the news of virtual worlds—the worlds of the Internet and the World Wide Web. People communicate, buy things, study, chat, explore, collaborate, and socialize in these virtual worlds. Sadly, some people also stalk others, engage in fraud, use hate words, steal, trick, and threaten. Many of the IRL (in real life) social issues have



become issues on the Internet. We carry the magic and the baggage of human civilization into cyberspace just as Columbus, Cortés, and others brought the Old World into the New World centuries ago.

The immersive world—Second Life, Third Life, Fourth Life—will amplify this trend. Educators will conduct research collaborations in immersive worlds and will train others in surgical techniques in these worlds. Students will study with master musicians and will meet with the

great scholars of the world. They will form friendships in virtual meeting-places, buy things in virtual stores, try on virtual clothes, and go on virtual dates. Immersive worlds will make it possible to improve the carbon signature of higher education. And again, there will be the lurkers, the leers, the spoofers, the spammers, the phishers, and the other ne'er-do-wells of both the real and the virtual worlds. The borders between this world and those worlds will blur. Human identity is becoming a configurable parameter.

The time is now to build and to experiment and to learn what it may mean to perform campus master planning when the master plan includes virtual spaces. We need to learn what it means to regulate access to institutional resources when those resources reside in virtual spaces. We need to understand the nature and limits of institutional authority inside the virtual classrooms and the virtual social spaces that bear the institution's name.

Virtual spaces—like the Internet and the web—will change society profoundly. They will change institutions profoundly. The emergence of virtual, synthetic, and immersive worlds is a revolution, and it will likely arrive sooner than we can assimilate it. Like all revolutions, the emergence of virtual worlds will present opportunities for some and threats for others.

Don't wait for worlds to collide. Plan, experiment, plan, experiment. Now.

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