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Welcome to this special issue of *Italics* on using virtual worlds for teaching and learning. Over the last two years using virtual worlds for education has moved from experimental to mainstream practice with the number of UK HE institutions using virtual worlds (in particular Second Life®) increasing substantially as shown by **John Kirriemuir** in his regular "*Snapshots of Second Life use in UK HE and FE*" (<http://www.eduserv.org.uk/research/studies/slsnapshots>). During this time we have seen virtual worlds such as Lively born and die but also moves to greater interoperability between worlds via OpenSim and, by the time this issue reaches you, Linden Labs will have launched the beta version of Nebraska: a 'behind-the-firewall' version of Second Life®.

This issue contains three very different, but complementary, papers on the use of Second Life® covering issues as diverse as student engagement, building campuses and creating experiential learning materials.

Gough and Dearnley have undertaken a review of 95 educational campuses in Second Life® looking at the ways in which they are being developed, their architecture and the resources contained within them. This provides a fascinating overview of the variety of ways in which campuses are structured. The textual descriptions of the campuses are enhanced by a series of photographs showing a sample of the range of the landscaping, buildings and gadgets that are in use on the campuses. Crucially the paper then goes on to analyse the authors' findings to provide 12 design principles for campus builders. These design principles are clearly explained and cover not just the physical design of a campus but also the need to design in-world groups and consider the marketing uses of a virtual world campus.

SLOODLE is used by a number of institutions to integrate Second Life® with the virtual learning environment MOODLE. The paper by **Callaghan, McCusker, Lopez Losada, Harkin and Wilson** provides details of a range of tools they have developed to teach computer engineering in Second Life® together with details of the mechanisms by which SLOODLE enables integration of a VLE with a virtual world. In particular the paper describes the development of an extension to SLOODLE that enables tracking and recording of in-world user actions which can then be used to track and update student participation in laboratory classes. The authors show that the combination of an immersive, interactive virtual world with the course management features of a more traditional form of virtual learning environment enriches the student learning environment and makes possible the development of engaging learning experiences for students.

The paper by **Mount, Chambers, Weaver and Priestnall** further develops the theme of engaging learning experiences by investigating the mechanisms by which learner immersion occurs in a virtual world. This paper provides both a theoretical review of the literature on immersion together with a qualitative insight into immersion derived from an empirical study of their students' experiences learn to set up wind farms. The qualitative and theoretical aspects have been blended together to produce eight principles that can be used as an aid to creating immersive student experiences.

Together these three papers provide material which will be of use both to new users of virtual worlds and to those with many years of experience - new users will find many suggestions for ways in which they could use a virtual world in their teaching, whereas those with many years of experience will be challenged to think again about the design of their campuses and teaching activities in order to further enrich the student experience.

Finally we would like to thank the authors who have contributed to this special issue on virtual worlds for their willingness to take time out of real life and share with us their experiences in Second Life®.

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