

Model-driven DSS: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using Second Life for decision support?

by Dan Power

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Multi-user visual simulations are at the leading and bleeding edge for computerized decision support. The major issues are not related to if and how the technology will be useful, but rather to timing for exploring the technology for business applications and which software platform to use. This column is the third in a three-part series on multi-user visual simulations and decision support and the focus is on Second Life (secondlife.com).

Second Life (SL) is "a 3D online digital world imagined, created and owned by its residents." It is also a controversial, emerging, exciting platform for multi-user visual simulation and decision support. Allison Fassin, in a recent Forbes.com article, notes more than 80 companies have set up some type of operation in Second Life primarily to "capture eyeballs" of the more than 8 million members. She discusses some of the problems with using SL for business purposes. A TIME.com reviewer expressed some additional concerns.

Second Life is the Wild Wild West, Iraq on steroids, Star Trek and "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" (1982) rolled together. It is social networking and it is a powerful development environment.

So what are the major advantages of using Second Life for decision support?

1) Easy access and low cost. The client is a free download like Firefox or Internet Explorer and people can participate without paying a membership fee. The client is still evolving and the new voice client is in testing by the community so the software may need to be downloaded every few weeks with updates. The software requires a high speed Internet connection, a fast microprocessor, good video/graphics card and 512MB or more RAM, and hard drive space for the many files in the download. The downloads are easy however, Vista seems to work with SL or use Windows XP or a Mac.

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2) Experienced and dedicated designer/builders. A quick visit to SL showcases the possibilities and the wonders that are still to come. Second Life has "few restrictions and provides broad and flexible content authoring experiences for developers". The quantity of available objects, textures and scripts to reuse is impressive and designers are available to create custom avatars, buildings and products. If you can make a rough sketch, a good builder can create a prototype quickly. With the floor plans and dimensions a builder can replicate your factory or with enough time an entire city can be replicated.

3) Tools and venues for communications-driven decision support. The tools include streaming video, voice, PowerPoint, agenda and meeting management tools, chat recorders, and even name tags for avatars. My recent column (DSS News, 7/15/2007) listed some major venues and DecisionSupportWorld.com will have resources related to venues with SLUrl links.

4) A large, dedicated user base. It is currently low cost to "hire" people/avatars to work for you in Second Life. The pay is in Linden dollars and you can easily hire employees from more than 50 countries. The accounting and tax issues are still ambiguous, but I assume the people are independent contractors. Companies like Manpower are in SL and can help sort out those issues. SL is an easy way for a company to "go global". Also, many of the users have great computing skills and they have learned how to use SL.

5) Impression management and creativity enhancement. Avatars look like whatever the user wants. I have ordered a custom avatar that looks a bit more like the real Dan Power. In the future, Leinad Meriman my SL alter ego will have a much stronger link to me and although I wish I could use my real name, anonymity has some advantages for certain types of decision support. Second Life breaks down some barriers to creative thinking and frees the imagination. Every time I fly in Second Life I feel like a Superman. It is easy for me to wear a tailored British suit or designer jeans. I can have hair in any style or color I want; we can bring in the clowns for a meeting or we can all wear Star Trek uniforms. Some people are reluctant to use videoconferencing because of concerns about how they will appear; with SL, users can consciously manage the impressions they create during meetings, events and activities.

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6) Time compression. A day in Second Life is 4 hours long. People connect quickly and teleport from venue to venue. SL is operating, the 7/24/365 nature of Second Life can speed up activities and change the perceptions of time of users.

7) Easy data integration from real life using RSS feeds. The possibilities for integrating data from various Web sources into Second Life are expanding rapidly.

8) Encourages active participation and experiential learning. People experience SL and those experiences impact real life. An SL meeting can be both enjoyable and memorable. A walk through a proposed factory can help understand what it will be like when built.

So what are the major disadvantages of using Second Life for decision support?

1) Learning time and training costs. Company executives are generally unfamiliar with Second Life and the learning curve requires at least 8 hours to gain a basic comfort level. A good "real life" coach can make the learning process much easier for an SL "newbie" manager.

2) Distractions are numerous. Second Life is a big virtual space and much is happening from shopping to sex, from sunning at the beach to skiing, from dancing under the stars at the Romantic Starlight Ballroom to a live music performance at the SL synagogue. Some of the distractions are very pleasant, but they create the possibility that employees will be playing when they should be working. Also, companies will need disclaimers and HR needs to review of policies on sexual harassment.

3) Griefing, pranksters and spam. There are all sorts of crazy people floating around Second Life with too much time to waste who devise pranks and nasty activities. From defacing buildings, to

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harrassing worshippers at a synagogue or conference attendees. Some of the conference venues now have security staff or restrict access based on a land access list. Security of many types is an issue.

4) Technology problems. Some problems include slow responses, lag in resizing objects, a need to empty cache memory following crashes (which do happen), a need to update software, and a need for headphones.

5) Chat is a very slow communication tool. The new voice client will speed up interaction of people in SL, but chat will still have a use especially with the automatic translators for multi-language communication. Voice interaction will be invaluable for SL meetings.

6) Resistance to use. Second Life is not like anything most executives have experienced and there will be resistance to using this technology. It is easy to view SL as a game and to overlook the real world decision support possibilities.

7) SL addiction. Some people have become addicted to using SL and spend hours on the system and become sleep deprived and neglect real life activities. Company HR personnel will need to monitor the behavior and attitudes of employees who are heavy users of tools like Second Life.

SL can be an effective business tool. According to John Brandon in a Computerworld article (5/2/2007) on the top business sites in SL, "What makes the IBM presence even more interesting, though, is what takes place behind closed doors. Regular 'brainstorming' meetings with clients have produced interesting ideas, such as a grocer that would sell items in Second Life and have them delivered to homes, and a fuel company that would hold regular training sessions for employees -- which would not be open to the public."

The use of Second Life for decision support needs to be carefully

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planned. We have much to learn and for this column I conducted some interviews with active, expert SL participants for some suggestions and tips on bringing executives to Second Life.

Paul Clevett, aka avatar PaulC Beck, CTO of Hyperstring.net, said "I think the first thing is that managers need to actually get in and experience Second Life before judging it; standing on the outside just doesn't work. I think it is small steps ... try holding a few meetings and then move on to the more complex stuff. SL is a complicated piece of software."

Rachel Hawthorn, aka avatar Katrine Fredriksson, is an RL/SL artist and mixed reality analyst focused on design issues. She is completing her MFA using SL at Bard College. She argues that for SL to work businesses goals must be defined. She thinks the "learning curve" is the major disadvantage. She notes "a strong B2B SL platform is needed and a RL marketing panel that integrates business solutions with custom appearance development." She noted, "it is important to make it easy for executives to get into SL with custom avatars."

Tom Samson, aka avatar Samson Francis, President and CEO Teamwork Dynamics (<http://www.teamworkdynamics.com>) focused on the need for SL technology evangelists in companies to make SL a decision support environment. Tom is an entrepreneur and was a Partner in a national accounting firm for more than 12 years. He noted "The first hurdle is to make it easier to get started in SL. Based on my experiences the best way to get a new executive into SL is to mentor them through the learning process based on their individual learning styles. Some want to do it themselves, some want to have someone help them and then some want someone to do it for them. I don't believe that IT/HR people are the best to help an executive get into SL. The most effective teacher will be a peer who has developed the skills and then helps their counterpart learn. The most enthusiastic are the young supervisors and managers who 'discover' the power of new technologies and then use that knowledge to advance their standing and roles in the company. The key is to focus on the payback."

Based upon what I have experienced, I am promoting the need for Second Life "train the trainer workshops" in organizations that want to use SL for decision support. The workshops should include a mix of

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HR, IT and junior executives and the purpose should be skill building and exploring decision support using Second Life. The idea is to spend a day with 15-20 key organization players and help them experience SL and get started, i.e., create an account, customize an avatar, learn basic skills in walking, flying and using voice communication. During the day the participants can then realistically explore decision support possibilities for the organization.

As far as the seven major disadvantages listed above, they are real and they must be acknowledged. Some of the SL problems will only be corrected with a specialized client, or more restrictions from Linden Labs or with a dedicated or restricted simulation environment. Training and awareness can reduce the impacts of some other disadvantages. Second Life continues to improve and evolve. The disadvantages will become less important and less significant.

During the past 2 months, I have concluded that Second Life is a real phenomenon and a powerful new technology. Managers can exploit Second Life today for "real world" decision support.

As always, your comments and suggestions are welcomed.

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