

The UC3M Campus in Second Life: Experiences and Opportunities

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Abstract. The UC3M library has been in Second Life since January, 2008. Since that time, it has created spaces which have not been used as much as we would like but which are very useful for virtual learning, and educational activities and information technology activities have taken place. Their usefulness could be improved if tools such as Sloodle were used, which would connect Aula Global (Moodle) platform with the campus and it could be applied to the blended learning degree programs.

Keywords. Second Life, virtual learning

Introduction

Since January, 2008, Universidad Carlos III has had a campus in the multiuser virtual environment Second Life, whose elaboration and maintenance is the responsibility of the University Library. The campus itself and various activities that have taken place have been described in papers which have been published in specialized journals as well as in other forums and workshops, which can be referred to for a more in-depth description. [1] [2]. At present this campus continues to function; we shall give a brief description of some of the new features and will also talk about its possibilities.

1. Current Configuration of the Campus

The main innovation is that since the new viewer of Second Life was established, objects have been able to be used as Web navigators (“Web on prim”), so that the profiles that the University as well as the Library have in social networks (Facebook, Tuenti, Twitter) are now accessible so as to link these two types of communications tools, as seen in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Facebook, Twitter, and Tuenti profiles on “navigable” prims

Another innovation is the creation of a specific building for use together with the University teaching platform, Aula Global, which is constructed on/in Moodle. This is of great interest because it gives us the option of being able to use the Sloodle extension, which allows us to combine the possibilities of this open code teaching platform with the 3D immersive environment of Second Life.



Figure 2: Aula Global building in the UC3M campus in Second Life

Sloodle, which has been in development since 2006, receives funding from the British organization Eduserv with support from the School of Library & Information Science at the San Jose State University (California), is an open code project that supplies tools for use in the Second Life environment in teaching and learning [3] [4].

2. Current Situation

It is a known fact that after the important surge of Second Life during 2007 and 2008, it is now languishing to some extent, almost abandoned by many, however with quite a bit of activity in the area of virtual learning, an activity that perhaps does not create a lot of headlines, but it never stops. And that is despite Linden Labs, the company which owns and maintains Second Life, eliminated the discount of 50% that applied to educational entities at the beginning of 2011.

As examples we could cite the Sheffield University, with its Infolit iSchool, devoted to information literacy, the American Library Association (ALA) Island, whose activity has never stopped, or the SJSU School of Library & Information Science itself, mentioned earlier as one of the supporting pillars for Sloodle.

The UC3M Library campus activity has been reduced, given the technical drawbacks involved in using an environment which is quite demanding in terms of computer hardware. In addition, it can be complicated to become accustomed to the environment and that discourages some users. The Library has never stopped incorporating information into the Second Life campus, first, with selected links to the most relevant informative pages and now with the link to the profiles the library has in different social networks, where the goal is to give the most information and offer the most interaction with users

Despite these complications, we have received more than 4,000 visits in the last three and a half years. The following table shows the average number of weekly campus visits, according to the data provided by the sensor installed there.

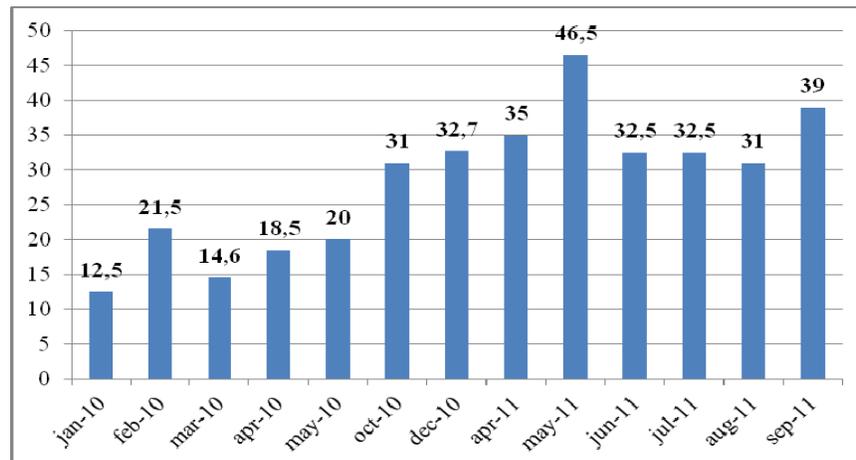


Figure 3: Average weekly visitors of the UC3M campus in Second Life between January 2010 and September 2011 (The sensor has not provided data of all months)



Figure 4: The visitors counter on 29 September 2011

As activities carried out in our campus in Second Life, we can include virtual meetings for library personnel, training courses for blended learning degrees and events such as exhibits and reader's club meetings in the Library.



Figure 5: The Library profiles in Twitter and Facebook in front of the main building

As a curiosity we can mention that despite not having a lot of activities, our campus is still seen as a reference in Spain in terms of university presence in Second Life.

3. Opportunities

In spite of all the problems involved, there has always been interest on the part of some professors in using Second Life for teaching. In fact, due to the requests of some professors, the campus is accessible from the University computer rooms.

If in the future the use of Sloodle will allow us to combine the possibilities of Aula Global with those provided by the virtual environment of Second Life, it is likely that the campus could be used often, especially in regards to the blended learning degrees, where many times, there is a feeling of isolation, which can even lead to a student dropping out. This environment could help to mitigate this sensation so that the student could feel that he/she is in fact together with classmates in a classroom [5].

4. Conclusions

We would like to say that there were lots of activities on our campus, but it is not true. Why? Is there enough information for potential users (professors, students)? Are there too many technical difficulties? Aren't we able to explain the benefit of this environment for educational purposes, especially for blended learning? Or has Second Life as a whole, and specially as an educational environment, perhaps been a victim of its own success? In addition, the elimination of the 50% discount for non-profit educational organizations in 2011 has not helped. In any case, we still think that it's a tool we can take advantage of, especially in blended learning degrees as a friendly and immersive environment that can mitigate the isolation that these students often feel and can reduce dropout rates in such degrees.

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