



How Meeting In Second Life Transformed IBM's Technology Elite Into Virtual World Believers



“The meeting in Second Life was everything that you could do at a traditional conference—and more—at one fifth the cost and without a single case of jet lag.”
 — *Joanne Martin, President, IBM Academy of Technology*

Executive Summary:

A Fifth of the Cost, and No Jet lag

The IBM's Academy of Technology has long been on the forefront of emerging technology research and exploration. In late 2008, the organization held a Virtual World Conference and then an Annual Meeting, hosted in a secure Second Life environment with a conference space specially designed by IBM for keynotes, breakout sessions, a simulated Green Data Center, a library, and various areas for community gathering. The 200+ participants were offered pre-conference training on the basics of Second Life to make them comfortable communicating and navigating within the environment. IBM estimates the ROI for the Virtual World Conference was roughly \$320,000 and that the Annual Meeting was executed beautifully at one-fifth the cost of a real world event. Many IBM staff were converted into virtual world advocates, paving the way for many future internal conferences and events to be held within the space.

“IBM has been making a significant investment in VWs now for 2 years. it's time to take it from research to reality.”

— *Karen Keeter,*
IBM Marketing Executive



Virtual Worlds Pique the Interest of IBM's Academy of Technology

Distributed among a technical staff of more than 200,000 worldwide, IBM has a select group of 330 thought leaders and technology innovators that make up the prestigious IBM Academy of Technology (AoT). AoT members are



“It would have been difficult for many participants to take time off to attend a live event.”

– Neil Katz, IBM Distinguished Engineer, Academy of Technology Member

responsible for providing technical leadership to IBM -- identifying and pursuing technical developments and opportunities, improving IBM's technology base, and developing IBM's technical community.

The AoT is always on the hunt for emerging technology trends and virtual worlds have long been on their radar screen. However, by late 2007, it was clear to several members of the group that virtual worlds were much more than an interesting gaming environment or social networking tool. They understood that virtual environments had the potential to change the way business is done globally and might be worthwhile exploring in more depth.

In fact, Neil Katz—an Academy of Technology member and IBM Distinguished Engineer—

recommended dedicating an entire AoT conference to virtual worlds. Irving Wladawsky-Berger, Vice-Chairman Emeritus of the Academy of Technology, heartily agreed and had an even better idea. Why not hold a conference on virtual worlds in a virtual world? Katz's co-chair for the conference, Larry O'Connell – Director of the Technical Advisor Project Office – agreed. It seemed to make perfect sense. A few months later, a Virtual World Conference was approved and scheduled for October 2008; it was to be hosted in a secure Second Life environment, by Linden Lab, the creators of Second Life.

IBM Gets Ready for its First Conference in a Virtual World

Early on, Neil Katz created a core team of individuals from across IBM to be responsible for the planning, scheduling, and design of this Virtual Worlds conference. Craig Becker - Global architect for IBM's Digital Convergence EBO and an experienced Resident of Second Life - volunteered to join the core team and operate as the Chief Architect and Design Leader for the project. Becker spent

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Karen Keeter,
IBM Marketing Executive



several months working closely with Linden Lab to establish sixteen regions in Second Life, behind IBM's corporate firewall, and create a secure location for conference attendees while maintaining access to IBM and other islands within the public Second Life environment. Becker, and a team of volunteer designers and builders, also built the conference facilities featuring a reception plaza, picnic area, three theaters, several gardens, support library, green data center, and community gathering spaces, as well as a whimsical desert landscape with glowing plants.



to make everyone feel comfortable with the conference space and with their avatars prior to the event.



“We truly felt as if we had attended a real-time meeting, interacting with others and carrying home practical information.”

— Craig Becker,
Global Architect, IBM Digital
Convergence

While Becker and team were hard at work creating the space, Karen Keeter, a marketing executive and a member of the core team for the conference, assembled another volunteer group from IBM's Virtual Universe Community (VUC)—an informal group of approximately 6,100 members—to help run the event and train new Second Life users. The training sessions included basic “getting started” tips such as how to register for Second Life, enable voice, use the viewer, and navigate the virtual environment. The goal was

IBM Academy of Technology Holds a Virtual World Conference in Second Life

When the big day finally arrived—October 21st 2008—the center was complete, volunteers were in place, and presenters and participants were ready. The three-day Academy of Technology's Virtual World Conference attracted over 200 members globally who attended 3 keynotes and 37 breakout sessions. Sessions were chosen from over 65 submissions by a panel of Academy members, led by Boas Betzler, virtual world architect, IBM STSM and member of the IBM Academy of Technology. To make it easy for attendees to find sessions, greeters from the IBM VUC served as conference concierges to assist attendees as they arrived. Kiosks were also set up in the reception plaza allowing participants to click



“Achieving that kind of relaxed conversation in that large of a group was a powerful thing.”

– Joanne Martin,
President, IBM Academy of
Technology

and teleport directly to the sessions that most interested them.

And, many of the breakouts were not just your run-of-the mill conference presentations. The space was purpose-built to encourage presenters to try more creative and interactive approaches, taking full advantage of what virtual worlds have to offer. For example, some “walking around” slide presentations were displayed on viewers mounted in the gardens. One presenter used a 3-D model of a

over \$250,000 in travel and venue costs and more than \$150,000 in additional productivity gains (since participants were already at their computers and could dive back into work immediately) for a total of \$320,000 saved (when compared to the potential expense if the event had been held in the physical world).

Although those ROI numbers are impressive, what was an even more compelling benefit was that people used the space to network and



server to show participants in more detail how to service the machine. And, the Virtual Green Data Center, where green technology from IBM was simulated, was a big hit.

Real Success in a Virtual World

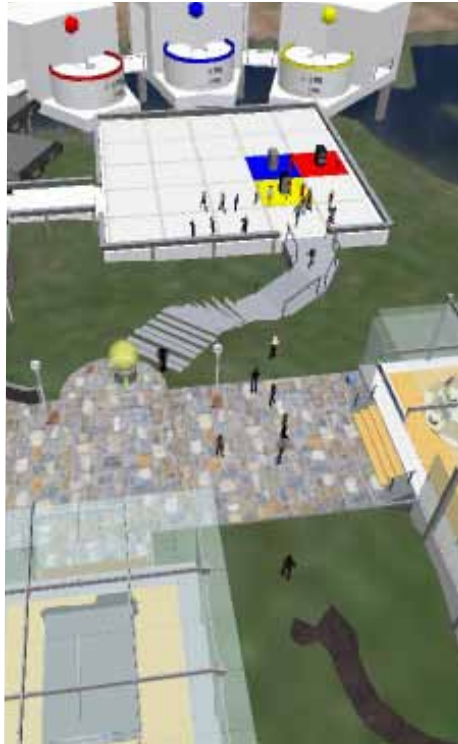
The organizers and volunteers unanimously agreed that the Virtual World Conference was a complete success and far exceeded their expectations. Attendees raved about the conference and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. With an initial investment of roughly \$80,000, IBM estimates that they saved

socialize. Conference sessions often ran long, as people continued to chat about breakout topics. And, at the end of each day, participants were found gathering in various places—a favorite hangout being the picnic area – for conversations over virtual cocktails. “It was great at the end to meet at the sculpture garden and hear several DEs reflect openly on the conference and where we could take the technology in the future. The ability to see the others there and the sharing of an interesting space together did contribute to a feeling of attending a event in a different way than simply dialing into a large conference call.”



“When you meet once a year, it’s hard . . . but we could now have discussions throughout the year.”

*Joanne Martin,
President, IBM Academy of
Technology*



So, not only did the attendees learn about the potential of virtual worlds while experiencing one, IBM also realized impressive hard cost savings and capitalized on all of the “softer” benefits of socializing and networking that can sometimes be the best part of physical world conferences.

Cancel the Upcoming Annual General Meeting? Second Life to the Rescue

One of the Virtual World Conference attendees was Joanne Martin, the President of the IBM Academy of Technology. Martin’s mission is to “transform the Academy, to get it more active and regularly engaged,” and this was an important item on the agenda at the upcoming AoT’s Annual General Meeting, scheduled for the following month, in Florida.

However, right after participating in the Virtual World Conference, Martin and her leadership team decided that it would not be appropriate to hold a large physical meeting. They canceled the upcoming general meeting, with only 2 weeks notice. But, they needed to create an alternative environment that would simulate the Academy’s Annual General Meeting.

Although she had never used Second Life before the October Virtual World Conference, she was so impressed that she decided to hold a portion of the Annual General Meeting in Second Life. But, this three-day event was larger and the agenda was packed with many different kinds of activities including:

- IBM Technical Agenda brainstorming sessions
- Executive sessions
- “Read-out” presentations with participants sharing findings from their research
- Birds-of-a-feather sessions
- “Poster sessions” where new Academy members present their credentials and discuss their work with other participants

Because of the complexity of the agenda, some portions of the event utilized webcasting and video conferencing, while Second Life was chosen to host the 120 poster sessions. The good news was that many of the spaces created for the Virtual World Conference could be



reused. Again, volunteers trained AoT members who had not attended the Virtual World Conference and served as concierge during the event.

Second Life Becomes the Beating Heart of the Annual General Meeting

Although other technologies were used, Second Life quickly became the persistent meeting place for attendees to hang out. Participants were found gathering and networking in the AoT reception area—even when there were no poster sessions scheduled. Karen Keeter said, “Anytime you visited the conference space, at any time of day, there were always at least ten to twelve people in the plaza socializing.” After seeing this spontaneous gathering of people, both Martin and Keeter agreed that social time —such as networking breaks or cocktail hours - should be officially scheduled as in traditional conferences.. In fact, based on the social networking activities organically occurring during the first two days of the conference, they

scheduled a two-hour networking event on the last day at the picnic tables on the beach. AoT members gathered around drinking virtual beers and chatting while others took virtual hang gliding or jet skiing lessons. It was the perfect finale for a phenomenal conference.

And the Cost Savings Couldn't Have Been More Real

All of these softer aspects are important, but it is the ROI numbers that really speak volumes. According to Martin, “Second Life provided an opportunity for us to have a positive social and technical exchange, addressing most of our collaboration objectives. And, we delivered the experience at about one fifth the cost and without a single case of jet lag.”

Conference Organizers and Participants Discover that Virtual Events are “Real”

When Joanne Martin talked recently about the rationale for a virtual meeting, she said it was all about connecting and networking—her mission as President of the AoT—and Second Life fulfilled her vision beautifully. “It was brilliant!” she said. “It was amazing! That I really felt a part of that [virtual] existence surprised me a lot—and for me opened up the potential for what this technology could be.” She went on to say, “The immersion [in Second

“Twenty different organizations asked to do meetings in-world the week following the conference.”

– Karen Keeter,
IBM Marketing Executive





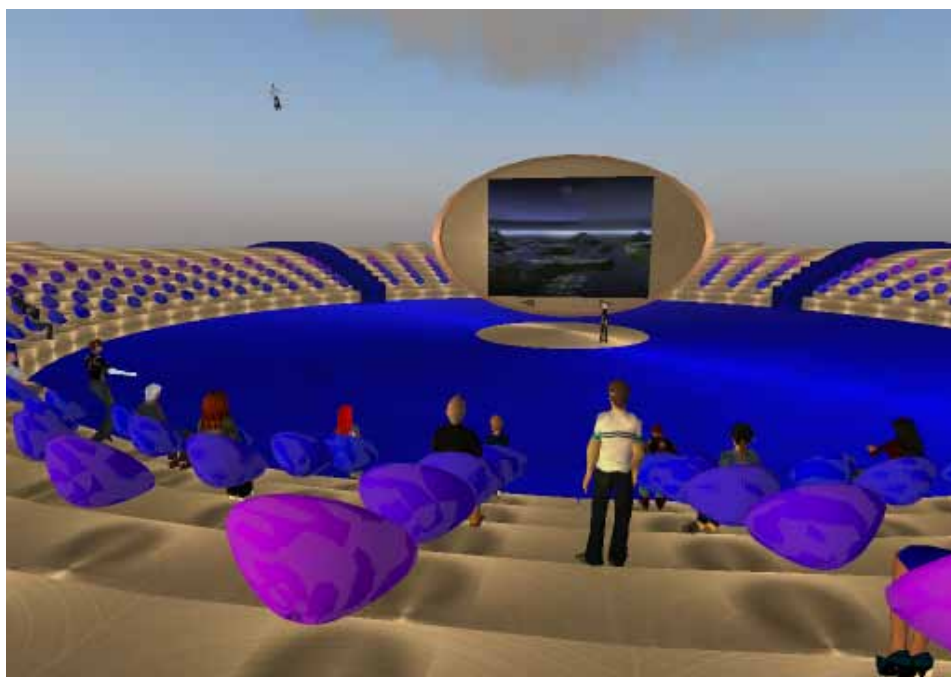
Life] resulted in a very strange, yet compelling psychological effect, where part of me really felt like I was physically there. And I would watch myself walk around and talk to people. Colleagues would wander over to talk to me. So there was that serendipitous meeting.” In fact, the space felt so real that Martin received a phone call, a few days after the event, from an Academy member asking if she could use the meeting space at the end of the day to go and relax in a hammock.

Becker agrees with Martin about “presence” in virtual worlds and went on to say, “When people woke up the morning after the virtual meetings and thought about the day before, it wasn’t like remembering a webcast or a phone conference. We truly felt as if we had attended a real-time meeting, interacting with others and carrying home practical information.” However, Katz acknowledged there

were, initially, avowed skeptics of Second Life among AoT’s members. He recounted a conversation with a colleague who said: “I don’t understand how this [virtual world technology] is going to make it.” Katz responded: “Well we’re in Second Life holding this conversation.” His colleague paused, and said, “You’re right, I’ve been here for two hours.” Katz said: “See. It really does work. We changed hard skeptics into critics and skeptics into true believers.”

IBM Looks Forward to a Bright Future in Virtual Worlds

After holding the Virtual World Conference and the Annual General Meeting in Second Life, the AoT agrees that virtual worlds will have a big impact on business, on IBM, and IBM’s clients. And, the best way to learn about virtual worlds is to use them—which IBM is now committed to doing.





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About Second Life and Linden Lab:

Developed and launched by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life is the world's leading 3D virtual world environment. It enables its users – known as Residents – to create content, interact with others, launch businesses, collaborate and educate. With a thriving inworld economy that saw over US\$360 million in user-to-user transactions in 2008, and a broad user base that includes everyone from consumers and educators to medical researchers and large enterprises, Second Life has become one of the largest hubs of user-generated content (UGC) in the world.

Linden Lab, founded in 1999 by Chairman of the Board Philip Rosedale and headquartered in San Francisco, develops revolutionary, immersive technologies that change the way people communicate, interact, learn and create. Privately held and profitable, Linden Lab is led by CEO Mark Kingdon, and has more than 300 employees across the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

Linden Lab

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