



## **A Virtual Presence: Creating Connections through Second Life**

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The use of virtual worlds for teaching and learning in higher education, particularly for distance education students, has gained in popularity in recent years. A recent paper focusing on the Australian and New Zealand situation [1] outlines the activities of around 20 academic institutions, members of the Virtual Worlds Working Group, who are delivering a wide range of programs or activities, primarily in Second Life, probably the best known virtual world.

This move to the use of virtual worlds for distance teaching has been seen as a positive step in meeting the concerns expressed by many students regarding the isolation and lack of connectedness they felt when undertaking distance study. Caplice [2], for instance, notes that from her experience, external studies fail to provide the learning opportunities afforded by the traditional tutorial and Heirdsfield, Davis & Lennox [3] highlight isolation and the lack of face-to-face contact as some of the challenges of distance education.

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is one of the largest providers of distance education in Australia. The School of Information Studies (SIS) has been a leader in this field for many years and in recent times has been at the forefront in exploiting the affordances offered by a range of web 2.0 platforms. One of the key platforms being used by SIS is the virtual world of Second Life.

CSU SIS has developed a Second Life learning centre that consists of classrooms, a lecture theatre and informal meeting spaces, where distance students interact, attend lectures and tutorials, access resources and give assessable presentations.

This paper will report on the experiences of two student cohorts (undergraduate and postgraduate) tasked with presenting their assignments in the Second Life environment. The paper documents the students' experiences of working in this virtual world and discusses whether a presence in Second Life does indeed help overcome the issues of isolation and lack of contact.