

In the Court of Public Opinion

(Fab5/Berkman Island Division)

In the matter of Second Life meetings: is there a recipe for a successful meeting?

Synopsis

This project began with the assumption that meetings in Second Life are so chaotic and confused that the only way to get anything done is to find ways to control the participants, and impose some order on the meetings. We now challenge that assumption.

After attending a wide range of meetings in Second Life, — large class gatherings, small group discussions, formal Linden Town Hall events, and business meetings of various kinds—we came to the opposite conclusion: restricting and controlling a Second Life meeting risks taking a challenging and lively forum and turning it into a sterile or useless exercise.

If you need the formality and structure that restrictions and controls might provide, then Second Life is probably not the best vehicle for your meeting. Second Life is only one among numerous options that you have for an electronic meeting, and you should consider it in the context of choosing a format that best meets your needs. If you want to brainstorm, discuss, debate and most importantly, listen to the views of others, then a Second Life meeting can be effective and highly productive.

Some controls on Second Life meetings can really make a difference. These are more about moderation than control, and are simply techniques that encourage participants to listen to each other and comment on each other's opinions. Wherever possible, detailed presentations of your own point of view are best kept off world.

A key part of this opinion is an annotated transcript of our final meeting. This presents oral arguments for the report, and explores the notion of the empathic moderator. It is also an example of the substance and quality of a Second Life meeting that would be impossible to fully capture in a written summary.

Intended Audience

We hope this report will be of value to those who are considering using Second Life for meetings, and those who have already tried the format and are looking for ways to improve the experience. The report may also have a wider audience, beyond Second Life itself. In the spirit of the course title, the Court of Public Opinion, there is more here than just our agreed conclusions. We invite the

reader into our discussion. And our opinion is not a ruling or a definitive statement. It is an argument, and it is for you to decide.

Structure of the report

This report is designed so that all voices can be heard. It allows both the real world participants in the class, and their avatars the opportunity to have their say. Second Life opens up the possibility that the avatar identity in world can be distinct from identity of the real-life person who drives it. Avatars can develop their own set of second life experiences, their own set of friends, and their own social rules quite distinct from those in real-life. Even if a person's first and second life identities are one and the same, the reality and rules of interacting with others in one environment may not transfer effectively to the other. Of course this is not true of all users of the virtual world.

We felt that the best way to allow the reader to decide the issue is to invite you into our decision meeting, and join in as at-large participants. For that reason, the major portion of this report is an annotated version (not a raw transcript) of our final official group meeting, where we review and discuss the views of all the members of the project group.

The group opinion is the consensus reached in this meeting. The avatars make their oral arguments for this report, using empathic meeting guidelines to structure the session. All of the advantages and disadvantages of a Second Life meeting are clearly on show.

The report ends with concurring and dissenting statements from the real-life participants in the project group. They may have views that just did not make it into the final discussion, or views that diverge from the group opinion.

Introduction

Project groups in the CyberOne class had to choose a group topic from among three broad categories. Our group spent a number of hours trying to come to some form of agreement on what project to choose. And we failed.

In the end, the class tutor (a penguin) told us to off-line the discussion, collect topic proposals from all participants and then vote on them. Our earlier meetings did trigger a number of good project suggestions, but the one that struck home after our experience was the question of why Second Life meetings can be so frustrating, and what can be done about them.

At the time, we were all very much in the "something must be done about this problem" camp.

The text of our agreed project topic illustrates our starting point:

What techniques can/might/are being used in Second Life to make effective group meetings?

Background: Probably because our group meetings have been so dysfunctional this is a project that could actually do some good. What happens in SL when a group goes larger than 2 or 3 participants? How can any meaningful conversation take place without very strict formal procedures (jury foreperson etc)? The project involves going to group meetings (e.g. Linden Town Hall meetings) talking to people who moderate meetings, looking to see if there are any "props" that make it easier for a discussion to actually resolve something. And see if there are RW techniques that help counter the chaotic free-for-all that we have seen in our own meetings.

The main result of our project has been the realization that the right question is not what to do about SL meetings, but what to do with them and how to use them on their own terms most effectively.

In our discussions, we have moved away from the view that meetings need to be controlled and toward a strong view that Second Life meetings have a vital quality of their own that needs to be encouraged and facilitated. What we initially saw as the problem is actually one of the most valuable characteristics of meetings inside the virtual world.

Of course, we are all fairly new to Second Life, so we come to this issue with a point of view that old-timers may simply see as a rite of passage. We are acutely aware that our limitations served to increase our frustrations as we began to interact as a group. And we admit readily that our observations are just that: our observations.

The Opinion of the Fab5 Project Group

Over the weeks, the Fab5 group has been attending numerous meetings, and discussing them in our own group meetings. These have ranged from SL Library and Chamber of Commerce meetings, to New Media Consortium sessions, and Berkman Island class gatherings. At least two of us went to Linden Town Hall discussions, and one member even explored the group dynamics of inworld poker games.

At first we believed that we were looking for subtle benefits that might derive from one form of control or another, and we developed a checklist, which we used to frame our thoughts about the meetings we went to. Two meetings, in particular, focused our ideas. The November 2006 Linden Town Hall meeting turned its back on current SL formats, and broadcast the Linden CEO's comments, user questions and answers using voice. Residents asked questions using Skype.

Answers were broadcast through the inworld voice media channel, and also over the internet. There were still large numbers of avatars at the meeting place, but their cross-chat discussions were entirely private. The public presentation was done using an appropriate medium and format, but it was not done in the way that people in Second Life normally interact.

On the same day, there was a panel session at Berkman Island. Cross-chat was not allowed, the “speakers” cut/pasted (or typed) their presentation and played some music fragments as well. The same content was far more effectively shown on the lecture videos. Second Life was the wrong format for that meeting.

These events made the group question the premise that meetings in SL can be improved by adding controls, and made us ask the question, “Why have meetings in Second Life at all?”

Once you appreciate the qualities that make a Second Life meeting uniquely interactive, the answer to this question is simple. The free-format second life style of chat can be engaging and stimulating. Many threads (cross-chat) can open up at once, and can continue with surprising clarity (compared to the confusion of everyone talking at once) and without necessarily disrupting the main thread of conversation.

If this format can enrich or enhance your meeting, you should consider meeting in Second Life. If you are having your meeting in Second Life simply because you happen to have some commitment to being inworld, then it may not live up to your expectations. This is particularly important if you need a tightly controlled structure. And if you do force a fit by imposing restrictions and controls, you may find that you lose the intrinsic benefits of a Second Life meeting.

The features that make Second Life attractive as a meeting place also make it less than attractive for some types of meeting. And controlling these features does not increase the likelihood that inappropriate meetings will succeed. All that is achieved is that the vibrancy of Second Life is lost.

Yet without some sort of control, a meeting may have no direction. You may be no closer to your goal at the end of the meeting than you were at the beginning. The control we propose is more a form of moderation or facilitation, and could be called an empathic structure. We do not want people to stop using the key features of Second Life in their meetings. Rather, we want to provide a minimal structure that allows all voices to be heard.

Our observations suggest that:

- a) A Second Life meeting works best when people explore each other’s points of view, engage in conversation and listen. If at all possible, you should get participants to present their point of view in advance, so that

the meeting doesn't degenerate into a group of people all clamoring to have their points of view heard.

- b) Second Life may not be the best place to make a decision. In our experience, there were a number of occasions (particularly early on when we did not know better) when members of our group thought they had come to a decision, only to find it being revisited as if no decision had been made, at the next meeting. Decisions are often best off-lined, so that participants can study the meeting chat history and think through all that has been said in the meeting. SL is wonderful for empathic discussion (trying to understand each others' point of view) and brainstorming, but the cross-chat style conflicts with the single focus requirement that is needed for decision-making.

Developing Empathy

Empathy is not the obvious response when one engages in the virtual world. You are confronted with a large number of other avatars, and it is easy to see them as pixels on the screen, or as players in your game, or as people who are inworld to listen to you.

We suggest that meetings are best controlled by ground-rules that encourage empathy, and discourage participants from all trying to state their positions. This is easier to achieve in a stable group where the members have come to appreciate each other, than in an ad-hoc group where avatars do not necessarily know each other.

One of the reasons that we were able to very much improve our meeting process is that over the course of several meetings we came to know, understand and respect each other, which very much added to our capacity for empathic interactions. In addition, getting to know each other better made us aware of subtle communication cues which made us better listeners and added fluidity and clarity to our on-line interactions that had been missing in our earlier meetings.

The success of an ad-hoc meeting will depend on the ground rules. The meeting transcript below is an attempt at providing an empathic structure through simple rules. The goal is for everyone to be heard, for everyone to feel that they have been heard, and for the argument to move on so that the meeting is a success.

The Final Group Meeting/ Oral Arguments

The decision group meeting served a number of purposes. At one level, it was the meeting at which we agreed on the "group opinion". On another it was a demonstration that you can apply structure to a Second Life meeting and still achieve a high degree of interaction and communication. And it was a deliberate attempt to set up a meeting where the ground rules were simple and the

foremost goal was empathy.

To avoid the situation where everyone demands to be heard, we had off-lined the activity of stating your own view. Each of us wrote (independently) a journal sized position statement. They were all then circulated to the group. The rules of the meeting (explained to the avatars themselves in the introduction) were that they would draw lots to decide the order of who was to run the meeting. Each person would have 10 minutes to lead the discussion. But the twist was that the person could not talk about her own views, only question others about aspects of their views that seem important.

The avatars are Art02138 Eddy (AE), Andy Abrahamson (AA), Cordelia Moy (CM), Quee Taiyang (QT) and Tetero Lesse (TL).

We join the meeting as the participants are learning about the rules of engagement. Only the moderator knew the meeting structure in advance.

AA: ok... everyone read everyone else's views?

CM: yes, except Quee's, but I've been in a canine world for the last hour.

AA: ok. Who would like to pick a color straw? which color would you like Quee?

QT: Red please!

[red straw: Quee goes first]

QT: :-p

AA: Art?

AE: yes? What are we doing?

AA: which color?

TL: what's with the straw?

AA: choosing a color to see who goes first

[green straw: Art goes second]

AA: who chose green ? Art? Ok, tetero. which color? red and green have gone

[CM is Offline]

QT: As has Cordelia!

TL: blue I guess

AA: hopefully she'll be back.

AA: here's the idea. Each of us gets 10 minutes to lead a discussion of the views of the others (not their own) and we do it in the order we just selected

QT: OK

AA: the person "in charge" leads.. i.e. asks leading questions... everyone else joins in. after 10 minutes we move onto the next. And after the meeting we should have (in the chat history) a consensus about what we agree on (Andy's attempt at an empathic meeting :-)) all we need now is cordelia

TL: very disconcerting when people just disappear

QT: just a question on leading the discussion (since it looks like I got the short stick) . . .

AA: yes?

AE: maybe this is an important part of the final project- making sure you have the group [apply their views in practice]

blue straw: Tetero goes third

QT: Are we leading the group in a discussion on the themes of each person's write-up? Or leading with our thoughts on each person's write up?

AA: you lead it by asking the others questions about their write-ups questions that you may have thought to be important or interesting but you don't lead it by talking about your own! hence empathic

QT: OK, thanks!

AA: were you green, Art?

AE: I guess

AA: ok so the order is Quee, Art Tetero... then either me or cordelia depending on which color she chooses

TL: I haven't seen Quee's position paper yet.

AA: well, that one timed out.. not her fault

QT: I sent it around just a little while ago. Sorry about that.

TL: Should we take time to read it first?

AA: ok. I will set the stopwatch and we have 5 minutes to read Quee's paper, and then we start. hopefully cordelia will back by then ok 5-minute time out

TL: OK.

[CM is Online]

black straw: Cordelia goes fifth

CM: Black straw. I go fifth. That's good.

AE: welcome back!

QT: Hi there Cordelia!

CM: Apologies all. I got kicked out and locked out for a bit.

QT: no problem!



AA: ok everyone. 5 minutes is up

AA: Cordelia chose black straw meaning she goes last

TL: ok I'm back

QT: I chose the red straw, so I guess I'm 1st.

AA: ok. so you'll probably get to ask a couple of questions you regard as key, and we will talk them through

TL: Do you want me to keep time?

AA: after 10 minutes. I will guillotine the discussion

QT: OK.

AA: I have an egg timer next to the computer

AA: ok, Quee Taiying, your time to lead starts.....

AA: NOW

Question:

QT: So I'll start with Cordelia's write-up. Cordelia you asked a lot of

questions, and one that I'm taken with is . . .the whole notion that visual cues like passing around drinks, falling asleep in conversations, etc.

CM: ;->

QT: lend towards the success or intimacy of a group discussion. You asked - why do we insist on the intimacy of sitting in a circle, etc.? What is your answer to that question Cordelia, and what are others thoughts?

[background]

Small groups learn over time to "read" each other's cues and habits: Tetero, for example, types then stops, types then stops. We see or hear the typing; the we see the ellipsis points and wait through the silence. We know that the thought is coming; we've learned to wait for the thought and to expect a well-formed thought (as Cordelia's father, King Lear remarked, "ripeness is all"). I stutter and get embarrassed. Andy has grey skin; Quee looks "normal." How do those bugs, features, decisions affect perceptions or whatever?

Gestures (or attachments) can be used to great (surprising? familiar? satisfying?) effect. What does it mean when we pass around cups of tea or make cushions for each other to sit on? What does it mean when I start blowing bubblegum or is silent for so long that her avatar falls "asleep." Has she left the discussion for "Law and Order? (;->). Why do we insist on the intimacy of sitting in a circle when we meet -- and facing each other?

AA: (cross chat is allowed here... please feel free..)

CM: Yes. In fact it's bothering me right now that I can't seem to sit down that way and that Art and Tetero are facing backward.

QT: Do you feel that it detracts from the conversation, and why?

AA: is it that SL itself detracts from the conversation?

QT: I know you're not literally turning your back on us. So why does that present a problem for SL chats?

CM: No, not SL. But the fact that by having avatars and such that are human or humanoid we bring expectations of behavior with us into this environment.

AA: interesting that they both got up when you said they had their backs to us al



QT: Yes, it is!

AA: it actually shows that the visual cues in SL are important

QT: More so than the actual conversation sometimes?

CM: I believe SL is about connection on a basic level. A question -- were you Tetero and Art at all uncomfortable with your seating? Right now,

TL: I still can't control things very well.

CM: I'm lagging, but I don't feel right that I'm standing and Quee and Andy are sitting.

AA: please feel free to sit with your back to us

CM: There's a power balance thing . . .

AA: I've already taken one photo of it

QT: I spent a few minutes putting myself in the 'right' position - facing everyone more or less. And I'm embarrassed when I can't seem to plant myself in the right position.

CM: Yes, so am I.

TL: For me its diff fm RL because visually I'm so focused on the Chat History, which takes up 1/2 the screen.

AA: art.. you are always drinking :-) does it help?

TL: I'm not as tuned into the visual cues

AA: yet you jumped up as soon as cordelia mentioned it

QT: I try to make the chat history as small as possible, only looking at the last 3-4 lines unless I'm going back in a thread.

TL: Wanting to accommodate and not be a dufus

QT: I want to ask one more question since we're half way through my 10 minutes, of Art. You said that you don't think SL is the ideal place to hold business meetings. Do you feel it curtails getting to the heart of the discussion vs. in-person discussions? Or its hard to collaborate, share docs, etc?

[Background]

Compared to a telephone conference call, Second Life is not the ideal place to have a business meeting. In connecting groups of people separated by long distances a phone conference call where everyone dials in and then just speaks might be easier for passing ideas among groups. Even an online chat room or an instant message session might be easier and more direct.

AA: you can get to the heart of the discussion.. but you may not realize it. and you can't easily make decisions

AE: You couldn't hold a company's quarterly call because of the technology with a phone I Just call a number and talk. phone technology is basic everyone has it

AA: sims are not designed for large numbers of people

CM: I kind of agree with Art's notion, though, that SL doesn't enhance or add anything (that's obvious to me) for that kind of scenario.

AA: and why would you want to risk tying your quarterly report?

QT: I see what you're saying.

TL: Yet what we're doing is a type of business meeting. Putting together our quarterly report

QT: Although I think it can be useful in some scenarios. (businesses solely in SL doing business).

AA: (it is hard work !!!!)

QT: Yeah! So maybe specific scenarios--like classes and such.

CM: Good point Tetero. But this is not our typical style of communication.

AE: I'm saying that not every person can be in sl because everyone doesn't have the technology

AA: DING!!!!!!! ok. Thanks Quee. hard to be first

AA: Art... your turn. ok Art, you have 10 minutes to lead us... starting

AA: NOW

AE: I think we all agree on some key points That it is important to make sure you have people that get to understand each other I think we all agree though that there are disadvantages

AA: so it's right for some things and not others?

AE: Like Andy you agree that advantages can be disadvantages depending on the situation Andy, What do you think of the ad hoc nature?

[Background]

The advantages of a secondlife meeting are:

1. anonymity. Whether you are a CEO or a busdriver, your contribution is not based on any firstlife reputation, but by the conciseness and relevance of what your avatar says. This (of course) is a feature of all "online chat" meetings.
2. cross-chat. While it can be destructive if the meeting loses focus and fragments, many strands of conversation can intertwine in ways that aren't possible in voice meetings.
3. the chat history. Minutes don't have to be taken. The chat history can be reviewed carefully, and should be if the meeting is going to be of value. Very often you will find things in the history that were missed during the conversation.
4. the ability to IM and chat at the same time. As well as allowing parts of a meeting to group together and decide on a common POV, the ability to have quiet asides without disrupting the flow allows people to catch-up, check that they understood etc, raise markers for later etc.
5. the rather annoying "seeing people type" is a feature that sets SL meetings apart from other chat forums. If you know someone is in mid sentence you can actually use these visual cues so you don't all talk at once.

The disadvantages are

1. anonymity. Avatar reputation as well as RL reputation has little value. A latecomer can enter a meeting and dominate it, paying little regard to ideas already on the table.
2. cross-chat. It can fragment the meeting so that sub-groups form, or a particular avatar "hijacks" the proceedings with his/her own agenda
3. typing (typing really slows down the debate and limits what can be said. Also it can test people's patience and trigger cross chat.

In other words, all of the advantages of SL meetings can be seen as disadvantages.... depending on what sort of meeting you need to run.

AA: I started by thinking it was a problem.. too chaotic. Now I think it is the only virtue of secondlife meetings. if you try to control people, stop then talking then the meetings are a waste of time and probably better done in another medium so the only way to manage the chaos is by empathy being ready to listen, not just talk at each other

QT: It doesn't bother me at all. I like it because to me it's a forum to allow new, totally unanticipated ideas and views to develop.

AE: Quee, what do you think about collaboration

CM: I'm sorry, what is "it" Quee?

AA: even if you don't get it during the meeting... the chat history has the gems in it

QT: The ad hoc nature of SL.

QT: I think that Collaboration is the whole purpose of SL. Whether its organized collaboration, or social collaboration.

TL: I'm not sure I know what you and Andy mean by ad hoc.

AA: in your write-up Quee you did talk about control still. allowing cross chat not having one person censor another

QT: I'm not sure if I'm interpreting 'ad hoc;' correctly, but the free form open communication nature of SL.

QT: Yup, but not at the expense of free-form collaboration Art.

TL: vs. strict agenda?

QT: A way to still have meetings, but at the same time allow other ideas to flourish.

AA: rules that try to make an SL meeting more like an RL one are a waste of time [you] might as well have some other sort of RL meeting

QT: I agree Andy. But I think about my RL meetings.

CM: Hmm. . .

QT: How we're always wed to an agenda, and target themes. And I think, 'what else are we missing'?

CM: I think it depends upon the nature of the group in the first place as well as its size.

QT: Missing because we didn't allow ourselves to get off track.

AE: But does SL make it harder to have a meeting?

AA: some types of meetings yes

QT: Initially yes, if everyone isn't up to speed with chatting and using the technology Art.

AA: you shouldn't have an SL meeting for its own sake

QT: But over time, as people get used to it, I think it becomes easier to meet.

CM: Here's another way of looking at the problem. what does SL offer that makes it worth the investment of time, learning curve, etc. ?

TL: I also pretty much hate RL meetings that happen for their own sake

QT: Hey Andy, you keep saying 'having SL meetings for its own sake'.

QT: I was going to say the same thing Tetero.

AA: yes I mean that if there is a better way to have the meeting you should use that if SL is a good forum for the meeting... brainstorming etc then it's ok

QT: I like Cordelia's question. I'm not sure how to answer it though. Maybe SL makes the interaction more personable?

CM: Neither am I, Quee (sorry that I seem to ask everything in a question), but I also think that SL will succeed or fail based on how well it does supplement (or change) human exchanges

AE: Andy, so you think the investment of learning the technology is worth the gems that might come out of the meeting?

AA: I don't think we could have had our in depth discussions in this class without it

TL: For me the big SL advantage is overcoming distance. If we were all in the same bldg, would we be meeting in SL?

AE: could we have had it on a phone?

QT: Do you think if we had met face to face, we'd have had the same conversations?

AA: I think our phone meetings would not have been so relaxed

QT: I guess the other thing that makes SL conversations unique, is that the conversations aren't linear.

AA: also there is anonymity. we are judged on what the avatars say

CM: Great question, Quee. I think not.

AA: not whether someone is timid, has a loud voice

CM: For one thing, we've been willing to be more reflective about the present activity in which we're engaged.

QT: Several threads going on at once. Over time you get used to it, and learn to work with multiple streams of conversation.

AA: DING!!!!!!!!!! (please finish what you are saying, don't stop)

CM: We don't usually have that "self-consciousness" in RL meetings.

AE: So we are talking on levels we wouldn't have been otherwise?

QT: Absolutely Art. I type faster than I talk too, so I can communicate faster in SL and IM than I would on the phone or face to face. More ideas per meeting in SL than RL!

AA: ok (ding) Tetero... you own the meeting for the next 10 minutes. starting

AA: NOW

TL: OK. Cordelia, wondering what you think is point at which a meeting becomes too large for SL.

[Background]

At present, large group meetings in SL only seem to work to the degree that they replicate or very closely model their RL counterparts. They need agendas, appointed/recognized facilitators, time-keepers, discussion leaders, note-takers. They succeed or fail by the technological interventions that are necessary to control them in SL. Thus we talk about the need to "thread discussions" in large meetings, about the importance of a chat history box to make something like sense of the welter of words on a screen. We look at chairs that allow an avatar to raise his/her hand as a way to manage conversation, for example, or imagine the day when voice might arrive in SL. Not even the Lindens have a good solution to offer us -- after the descent to mob rule (and mass chaos) of one town meeting, audience participation was streamlined (straightjacketed) in the next, when questions had to be submitted by email (or IM?). Is the large meeting, therefore, at odds with the notion of an empathic encounter? Empathy implies a two-wayness that big groups can't imply.

My limited experiences in SL suggest to me that large groups aren't "done" any better in SL, . They have a necessary function to the SL environment in terms of information dissemination (among other things), but they won't push our notions of community or collaboration to the next level or a new level (at least not yet). [In the educational context, does that mean that CyberOne was perhaps too big for its SL britches? Don't know the answer to that one.

I suspect that the real potential of SL is the small group, which can present "authentic" (whatever that means) opportunities to have meaningful, two way (empathic) encounters.

CM: A great question. I don't know if I'd give a number (20? 30?) so much as the multiplicity of cross conversations that happen.

AA: so it's maintaining the control thread that is the key?

TL: Wow. I would have said 10 was a large meeting.

AA: stopping fragmentation?

CM: Yes.

QT: Usually when you have over 8-10 people in a meeting, lots of sidebar conversations happen. I'm as guilty as anyone of doing that, but I try to IM people privately when I'm in a meeting instead of disrupting the main chat.

AA: is that a bad thing Quee? or just if it goes off topic?

QT: Wish everyone would do that.

CM: These could be in IM but when they happen in the chat box, they engender the feel of chaos.

TL: Do you think you could get used to functioning in a meeting like that? develop the skill for sorting out multiple threads?

QT: Not necessarily, but it depends on how far off topic you go. If I'm going way

off topic, I click on someone and IM them privately.

AA: I wonder if you need to resolve the issues during the meeting or whether you can sort things out afterwards using the chat history

QT: I guess it depends on the meeting too.

TL: What surprises me is that the meetings don't descend into total chaos.

AA: didn't our early meetings do that?

QT: I think the biggest thing for me is that it seems that SL meetings warrant MORE time than RL meetings, not less, because people feel they can more freely express and explore new ideas.

QT: I.e. a 2 hr mtg in SL vs. 1 hr in RL

AA: the time goes quickly

TL: Often I can't tell whether a comment is in response to the one that just was made or 5 comments back ?

AA: no doodling on pads

AA: playing tetris

AA: in fact having your laptop open is a positively good thing

CM: Or whether, as time goes on, people will develop the capacity to sort in the same way that Millennials are now said to be good multi-taskers. Andy -- think about the number of times in SL we've gone way over our projected "hour." Most of the time, it's after 12 EST when we finish.

QT: In multithreaded conversations, I pick out what I want to explore as we go along. Chime in on those things at some point.

CM: I'd say that even in a small group . . .

CM: the pace of conversation can create a bit of confusion.

CM: My last comment was an effort to catch up -- I had a thought about

TL: OK so what is the role of empathy here?

CM: the skill of sorting . . . and then a thought about Andy's later comment.

AA: realizing that you have to listen to these strange pixels

QT: But I think if you're facilitating a meeting, and you have specific things the group has to accomplish, you can keep the group on task by repeating questions w/in the chat until you get the answers.

CM: Someone would have to untangle my comments.

AA: we will cordelia

CM: To figure out the referents, that is.

TL: Does the non-linearity create more of a need for empathetic interactions?

AA: you mean without empathy it's a failure?

TL: Not sure.

CM: But without empathy, are we in danger of not listening to each other --

AA: when there is real disagreement, then these meetings can be very frustrating

CM: just getting our own words out?

QT: I don't know Tetero. I guess I don't think empathy is required for successful non-linear conversations.

AA: remember our earliest meetings?

QT: Listening and comprehension skills are required for sure though!

QT: Yes Andy

QT: I guess with the early meetings, I personally wasn't frustrated by the chaos of the conversations (it's my RL too), but I felt badly about everyone else's frustration with it.

QT: Oh, thus empathy, right?

AA: DING!!!!!!

QT: Or maybe sympathy in that case.

CM: And we hadn't established trust yet -- we didn't know each other.

QT: I'd definitely say you have to have empathy or sympathy or else conversations turn negative and go nowhere.

AA: ok. thanks for that tetero

AA: my turn now, and I'm going to throw it back at you tetero

AA: in your write-up you say how we developed empathy, and our meetings improved implying this was because of the empathy or is it that the empathy improved because the meetings improved. in other words is it something that "just happens over time"? Things seemed to "click" after we found another way to reach a decision. Was the development of empathy sudden or gradual?

[Background]

The outcome of our project stems from the simple observation that when our group began to meet, there was frustration about what was happening "in meeting" that was felt to some degree by all the participants, and that, without our consciously addressing the causes of it, this frustration diminished over time. We developed the simple hypothesis that what made the difference was an increased comfort with each other and an increase in mutual respect between us. In the language of CyberOne, our meeting interactions had become more empathetic. This empathy allowed us to both be more tolerant of each other's communications quirks and better able to listen to what others had to say, even if it that required holding back our own comments until someone else was finished or another topic had played itself out.

The conclusion that our meetings improved because they became more empathetic is certainly plausible and perhaps even compelling in light of what we saw in our own project group meetings and in Second Life meetings we've attended as observers.

To a conscientious investigator, answering one question often raises other, and this answer can be taken as a starting point as well as a conclusion. Some of the follow-on questions that strike me as potentially interesting are:

- How does a group build the relationships among its members (either within or

outside of meetings), which will contribute to empathetic interactions?

- How do you best initiate people into empathetic practice?
- What do you do if some participants choose not to play by the rules of empathetic meetings?
- What other factors go into making a meeting successful, and how do they interact with empathetic relationships?
- How do you respond when the forms of empathetic interactions are being followed, but true empathetic content is lacking?
- Do certain leadership models contribute to, or detract from empathetic practice?
- Do certain process models contribute to or detract from empathetic practice?

There is another factor that I feel also needs to be considered. Does the fact that we feel better about our empathetic meetings necessarily mean that they are better meetings, and, if we believe they are, how can we prove that to a skeptical observer?

TL: I'll dodge a bit and call it a feedback loop. Empathy >> better interactions >> more empathy

TL: But I'll admit to using empathy loosely.

AA: was there a moment when things got better?

AA: or was it gradual

TL: To include familiarity, respect, even friendship

QT: I think there was a point when we were united in conflict or against a common enemy--when our meetings kept getting interrupted by griefers.

QT: That accelerated the development of empathy I think.

CM: Isn't that interesting -- there is something akin to friendship developing here.

AA: Quee do you think that Gene's intervention helped when we were going round in circles?

QT: I think it did a little bit, but ultimately he said 'just make your way Fab5 group', and eventually we did.

CM: I'd say Andy, that Gene maybe modeled a way of leading discussion and listening

QT: I think talking to Gene just allowed us to see that maybe we were putting too many expectations on ourselves, given where we were at that point in time.

AA: so he forced us to take a time-out from SL and sort out our problems?

CM: Or he somehow demonstrated -- by listening closely -- that we could listen, too.

AA: Art. moving on to what you say about other mediums being better. you also say Even an online chat room or an instant message session might be easier and more direct

QT: Or not worry too much about level of progress at that point, and instead continue to follow the road the discussions were taking to achieve our goal.

AA: do you think that SL is anything more than online chat and IM?

AE: there is creation

AE: in that we can create a kind of object, etc

TL: For me that's the \$64 question Andy.

AA: I meant does it have a value beyond chat.

TL: I think it is, but I can't say why.

AA: is the rest of it just fluff?

AE: chat is one dimension

QT: I think the add-on in SL is 'presence', which has more value than anyone probably could have imagined.

AE: sl is 3 dimensional

CM: Yes, Quee.

AA: so it's more real than just text IM/chat

AA: maybe you can empathize more with an avatar

TL: In RL, I believe buildings matter. It seems like there's an analogy

AE: there is more to distract

AA: than with someone typing who you can't "see"

CM: Yes, Andy, I think so. Even if the avatar isn't human.

CM: Didn't we respond to your podcast on that level . . . at some level?

QT: Just the notion of interacting with a totally virtual-animate object, like a beach or a dog, or a whale, and 'experiencing' something through your avatar's presence, is totally on another level.

AE: If you are on im there is nothing but text

AA: and you are typing into the void

AA: DING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

CM: No ability to reach out beyond the words.

AE: in sl you aren't

TL: I would love to have one of our meetings in a chat room, and see if it feels different.

QT: I agree Tetero, that's a great idea!

AA: And finally (after this we can have a small free for all)

AA: Cordelia

CM: Yes, my turn .

AA: this is your meeting for the next 10 minutes. starting
AA: NOW

CM: Andy: question for you --

CM: You imposed a very different structure on our communications over the last week:

AA: sorry about that

CM: more formal, more organized, perhaps a bit more controlled.

CM: No no that's an observation, not a critique.

CM: Even the straw thing tonight . . . what made you do that?

AA: fairness

AA: even though I was pushing a way to run the meeting

CM: Please, go on. It's very interesting to me; it works.

AA: I didn't want to say you go first etc

AA: and I wanted everyone to be able to talk about things

CM: And you wanted equality of voice.

AA: in the past we spent a lot of time explaining our views

AA: here we know the views in advance and we can spend our last meeting

AA: tying up the loose ends

CM: So what looked like a new kind of control for us was perhaps a new level of empathy?

AA: I realized we had one more meeting left

AA: and wanted it to be special... and successful

AA: and Quee's voting system earlier worked a treat

AA: use SL for what SL is good at, and offline the rest

TL: Andy, what's interesting is that you gave it structure.

CM: Yes, exactly.

CM: And we worked with it. It wasn't a straightjacket, just a boundary.

TL: Right

CM: Which means, I think, that there's potential for meetings to be effective even if they're not just brainstorming.

AA: if we'd asked people to express their ideas this evening it would have been very hard

AA: the fact we can talk *about* them makes it a lot easier

AA: also that no one person runs the show

TL: I hope we can include this in our summary

QT: I think it was a great system. Sometimes a framework to operate within helps people to get to the heart of things.

CM: I think we have natural leaders in this group, but there isn't a "boss."

the difference is important.

AA: also tetero might be able to use this experiment for his moot meeting

CM: Tetero, may I ask you a question about your moot court?

TL: SURE

CM: How do you see it building out of these discussions we're having now? What's the connection you want to achieve in the presentation?

AA: I was going to talk about this in the free for all..

AA: would you like to talk now about it?

TL: I've been thinking about that. It'll be challenging. Things are getting a lot more complex, but also I think a lot closer to the core of what really has been happening.

AE: How long was this meeting going to be?

AA: we have just a few more minutes of cordelia's time

AA: then we can tie up loose ends

TL: What I really want the presentation to do is to demonstrate what we've concluded in an immersive way.

AA: twenty minutes more maybe?

CM: Okay Andy.

AE: ok

CM: Keep going, Tetero, if you have more to say. OR: how can we help you make the project work well?

TL: So up to now I was focusing on the empathy part. Which I think is valid.

TL: But I think there also needs to be some kind of structure.

AA: (ding... but we are now in a free for all... talk a little more.. then we talk structure and tasks)

CM: Can I make one last comment? It's this:

AA: please

CM: empathy is achieved; structure is imposed. Structure might be the first step for many types of meeting, but empathy evolves.

TL: Well what gave tonight's meeting its form was in part having the position papers to work from.

TL: Most meetings won't have that.

TL: Taking turns was key I think.

CM: So I wonder if a one shot meeting would accomplish your aims.

AA: not without preparation....

TL: No it wouldn't exactly, but it could demonstrate stuff.

CM: Yes, I agree it could!

TL: I'd really like to include as a major part of the meeting an exercise to let people get to know each other

CM: I have an idea:

AA: tetero.. is this separate from the "presentation"

TL: also I think limiting the size is important, because people are not yet familiar with each other

TL: go for it Cord

CM: Could we ask other small groups how they came to see themselves as groups? If they did . . .

AA: yes that's the question I was going to ask before I ran out of time

CM: or will that be too much like psychotherapy and perhaps too off-putting for the groups that may not have bonded

TL: That would be interesting. How would we approach them?

AA: well, we could encourage them to add comments to our report when it is on the wiki

CM: Through the project wiki pages?

CM: It might be interesting to hear from Rebecca and Gene, too..

Presumably, they've seen both big and small groups function or not. And they have clear ideas about "empathic argument" that would inform our discussion, immersive experience, etc.

After the meeting

As a final section, the real life people behind the avatars are given their voice. This section is an *opportunity* for the project members to concur, dissent or move the debate forward.

Andy Bartlett (Andy Abrahamson)

For me the most significant part of this project has been that it has been a journey from one quite extreme viewpoint to quite the opposite. The group rejected controls on meetings, and changed the question to say that you don't have meetings in Second Life for their own sake. If a meeting truly benefits from the Second Life format, then it can be helped along by some simple empathic guidelines, perhaps similar to those we adopted in the opinion meeting above. If a meeting would be better held in a different forum, then trying to force it to work in Second Life will be a waste of everyone's time and effort.

The addition of voice to Second Life will change the equation significantly. The level playing field provided by anonymity and typing will be lost. As in real life, those who are adept in public speaking and those who can carry an argument will run the meetings, and those with quieter, less forceful and less immediate and coherent voices will lose out.

If you are meeting regularly with the same group of people, then the meetings improve over time as you all get to know each other, and understand that there is a person behind the avatar. One critical question is whether there is any way to speed up this process so that ad-hoc meetings can be held in an atmosphere of trust and willingness to listen. One suggestion is that some relationship building exercises could be done at the start of the meeting. Some warm-ups, where you learn that the meeting's success depends on the ability of the participants to engage with each other. Another is that the tradition of role-play in virtual worlds might provide a shortcut to empathy and engagement. If your meeting has an enforced structure (e.g. a moot court), then the participants will engage effectively through the roles that they take on, and play out the scene effectively because they adopt well understood social roles and follow the rules that go with their positions.

Aquelah Davis (Quee Taiyang)

Coming from a real-life environment full of meetings with agendas, deadlines, time limitations and controls, I found my experience in Second Life to be very liberating at several levels. Second Life enables people to use multiple

technologies under one 'roof'--i.e., document sharing, game-like collaboration, etc. The fact that people around the world can 'interact' real time in an environment more directly through use of their avatars, brings us ever closer to worldwide, on-demand collaboration.

Second Life allows people to more freely focus on shared idea development. The fact that others can jump in and out of conversations at will enhances the idea of free collaboration, and allows people to collaborate with people they might never have thought to communicate with otherwise. I think the best thing Second Life has to offer though, is the freedom to not conform to traditional societal and business controls, and to instead to 'free-range' ideas and topics and develop new solutions to problems that we might not otherwise think about in a structured, controlled setting.

Controlled meetings in SL (i.e. through stringent moderation, use of technical tools to thwart griefers, etc.) can be necessities for conducting meetings in SL similar to RL meetings, where an agenda needs to be followed and resolved within the meeting, or negative consequences will develop. E.g. - the SL Chamber of Commerce (COC) held a meeting where we had to decide what the scope of the COC would be with the 1st iteration of its' existence, so that the Board could begin development of those items. If we had held the meeting in an area popular with the general public, and were constantly interrupted, or if the attendees themselves got off track, we would not have been able to come to a decision and move on to development of the services provided by our organization. We also had time constraints we had to respect (1.5 hrs for the meeting, meeting only 1x every 2 weeks, etc).

At the same time, we had meetings where we needed to think through the purpose of the COC. Those meetings tended to be longer, extended beyond our normal meeting time (2 hrs +), and were what I call 'free form' where we explored new ideas. Had others 'crashed' the meeting at that point in time, we probably would have welcomed their input. The meetings were disjointed in topic, and we floated from one concept to the next in an attempt to identify what is possible in the context of the COC. If we had a more structured approach to those meetings, we may not have gotten very far in our 'discovery'.

So my thought is--different types of meeting purposes exist--'discovery' meetings vs. 'structured' meetings. Conceptually loose meetings vs. working meetings. Our Fab5 group meetings over time went from conceptually loose to structured. Coming from a 99% structured meeting organization in RL, I can understand how it is uncomfortable to operate in an environment where the discussion can be drive by which way the wind is blowing, so to speak. But I find that very liberating and conducive to innovation and new thoughts, so to me it's not a bad thing. Conversely, I find that structured, controlled meetings in RL can be restrictive to the point where critical ideas can be overlooked.

At the end of the day, I find Second Life a very liberating place to go to when I want to explore Second Life, explore new ideas, forge new relationships, or just learn something new. I think it has a place both as a personal entertainment venue, and as a place to do business. Over time and with more usage, I think people will become more comfortable with Second Life as a business venue in the same way that the Internet itself developed as a place to do business. There are hurdles to overcome in terms of the technology, and establishing rules and controls that can (but do not have to) be used to manage environments more effectively, and once that happens Second Life will become a truly legitimate place to do business.

Susan Gilroy (Cordelia Moy)

I agree with the group report.

Peter Hess (Tetero Lesse)

Our report is very strongly grounded in our experience of Second Life as part of CyberOne. For my addendum, I'd like to try to project a bit beyond that experience.

I think we produced a nice piece of work, and developed a good, solid working relationship along the way. But as far as we have come as a group, I don't think we have explored all of the possibilities that collaborative work in Second Life (another way of saying "meetings") has to offer. I think we would have been an even stronger team had we been better at working through disagreements. Being able to feel and express empathy sincerely (rather than formally), in the midst of a conflict in which you are emotionally engaged is hard for me, as I think it is for others, and not something I'm comfortable with yet in either venue (SL or RL).

We learned a good deal about the way our group interacted in the course of working together on this project, and I think we drew some useful and valid conclusions from our experience. But because that experience, of necessity, had limitations (beyond the relational ones discussed above), there are some interesting and pertinent questions that it doesn't serve to answer:

1. How well would the conclusions we drew hold for a group with more (or fewer) members? What is the optimal size for Second Life meeting? At what size (if any) does a meeting become unmanageable?
2. How much does what we observed in our own interactions depend on unique interpersonal chemistry between the members of our group?

3. Are our conclusions particular to on line meetings? Do they apply to a greater, lesser, or equal extent, or not at all to meetings held in other contexts?
4. Were there obvious factors that we overlooked either because they weren't part of our experience, or because we were so close to them that we were unable to see them?
5. Was the assumption that we made in our report about the inappropriateness of a Second Life meeting for certain purposes (decision-making, for example), really more about the need for a level of skill in using Second Life meetings that we have not yet attained.
6. To what extent do cultural diversity, or lack thereof, and cultural norms in general, play a role in how Second Life interactions play out and are perceived?

This list could probably go on and on.

Another thing that I've been thinking about is the limits of our inquiry, in terms of its objectivity and rigor. We weren't doing formal research, so we were not called on to meet that standard, but our assertions would be stronger had they been held up to more rigorous testing (or they could have failed, raising new and interesting questions).

Our method of investigation clearly has some built in biases. For example, our group based its report largely (though not at all exclusively) on self-observation, which always implies a degree of subjectivity. Even when we took the role of observers of other meetings, we didn't evaluate them with instruments of proven reliability, or in fact, any tools at all, other than our own eyes, ears, and brains.

Our judgment that our interactions improved over time is one that is subject to suspicion of bias. The argument could be made that the very empathy we're citing as our strength may be clouding our vision. Members of a supportive group are likely to praise each other for routine accomplishments and overlook failures that might be obvious to less empathetic observers. Problems we have attributed to structural characteristics of Second Life meetings could, in fact, have been our own shortcomings.

I believe we are on to something valid in the ideas we presented in our report. Had we imposed the requirement of scientific objectivity on ourselves, time constraints and our lack of training as researchers would have resulted in our going precisely nowhere. And, let's remember, many useful and profound insights in science and art have come from careful self-observation.

But this doesn't free use entirely from an obligation to seek scientific rigor. Were there time and energy to do so, we could have found or developed objective instruments to use to make our observations, and outside observers to more robustly analyze our data. A theory supported by this sort of investigation would stand on a much sturdier platform.

Art Lewis(Art02138 Eddy)

I agree with the group report.

Conclusion

This report has attempted to square the circle. It brings together the arguments of group members with quite different points of view, and presents a consensus, a discussion, areas of dissent and issues that never reached the table.

Our group found a way to manage meetings empathically. We learned what to do (listen and engage) and what not to do (state our position). We also, eventually, remembered that Second Life simply offers the space to be used for meetings.

It is up to you to decide if your meeting will work effectively in that space. If it does, then you should be able to find a meeting format that will allow the participants to achieve the goals of the meeting.

If it doesn't, then it doesn't. And no amount of control or restriction is going to change that.