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Virtual Worlds at Virtual Conferences

**** * * On the Internet * * ****

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Abstract

With the onset of COVID-19 and the continuing need to move both teaching and professional encounters online, novel approaches providing effective ways of doing both are gaining increasing attention. There was of course considerable work being done in virtual worlds long before COVID-19 became a factor, but now that it is becoming the norm for conferences once held exclusively face to face to be moved entirely online, there is renewed interest. As should be obvious, developments in classroom approaches to remote teaching can be modeled for teachers in virtual conferences, and virtual worlds modeled in virtual conferences can conversely serve as models for virtual classrooms, and even for other virtual conferences. Here, we take a look at online versions of major conferences, in particular the TESOL 2021 Virtual Conference just ended, and the parallel track implemented and managed by the CALL-IS Interest Section in TESOL. The latter included several presentations featuring the virtual worlds Second Life, OpenSim, and Minecraft. This article suggests that, apart from how such presentations are aimed at showing language teachers ways they might incorporate virtual worlds into their online or blended teaching, organizers of major conferences would do well to borrow from what presenters are modeling at their events.

ERT: Emergency remote teaching in the new normal

All currently practicing teachers surely have their stories about where they were when COVID-19 first impacted their lives. The author of this piece was in Thailand giving a series of workshops on blended learning in January, 2020 and followed this with an eLearning component in February-March (Stevens, 2020, August 27).

Many schools in Thailand and elsewhere around the world were just beginning to suspend face to face classes at about that time. Some of the teachers who started the eLearning course

as an academic exercise found themselves actually in that situation before the course had ended. Teachers at this stage tended to fall into one of two categories, those who had already taught through blended and eLearning and those who hadn't. Teachers in the latter group had surely been exposed to blended and eLearning for a long time, but had been putting off implementing it in their own practice, and the fact that they were suddenly having to grapple with it left many anxious about not knowing where to begin (Figure 1).

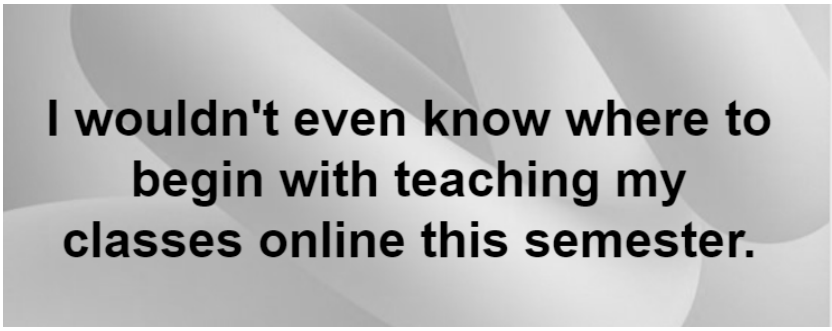

Figure 1. A Facebook posting by one participant in the author's eLearning course.

The eLearning course included webinars with teachers facing this situation with varying levels of expertise. One of these was Jeff Lebow. an EFL teacher in the former category with decades-long experience in engaging teachers through podcasts (Lebow, 2006). Jeff has since been utilizing his approach with his Korean students, getting them to interact via webcam online; e.g. demonstrating preparing their favorite foods for one another. Jeff explained how he had been able to help teachers he worked with transition through ERT into a smoothly functioning remote teaching environment. He showed us how he had couched his department's modules into as many tabs of a blog on Blogger (Figure 2). With all of this in place, Jeff said that when ERT became necessary all his colleagues had to do was "just add Zoom."

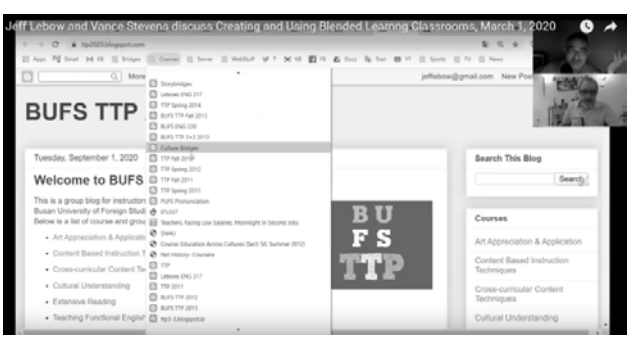

Figure 2. Screenshot from Lebow's webinar appearance (Stevens, 2020, March 1).

Successful teachers are known for their resilience and, when under duress and put in the position of having to respond to their students' changing needs, many have been able to come up to speed and share with each other how they did it. It's not as if there weren't people in schools and professional organizations that weren't developing skills in blended and eLearning, and sharing them as the opportunity arose with fellow teachers, but mostly the

benefits were trickling down to students or, in the case of professional development through institutions, to teachers receptive to learning how to apply the latest technologies in their practice. The problem was that, until the global pandemic abruptly provoked the need to move into Emergency Remote Teaching at scale, too many practicing teachers had been avoiding the trickle.

When schools were forced to cancel in-person classrooms, and teachers were forced into Emergency Remote Teaching, most fell back on whatever tools remained in their repertoire to manage the situation. Zoom was a part of that repertoire despite its having been a freemium platform, but in response to the pandemic crisis, Zoom announced a number of free support options for schools such as lifting the 40 minute limit on free Zoom meetings (Gallagher, 2020). As a result, Zoom became almost the default platform for ERT. Teachers applauded the heightened availability of a tool that went a long way to meeting their needs, even as many teachers and students expressed negative impressions ranging from issues with Zoom bombing (Stevens, 2020, June 18) to unfamiliarity with the medium, which left many students unengaged even as some teachers scrambled to use the tool in appropriate and imaginative ways. A video of a student sleeping behind a cardboard cutout during a Zoom class went viral on Facebook (AgBioWorld. 2020). At the time, lack of engagement was implied to be the problem, but researchers have lately been looking into Zoom fatigue as an additional mitigating factor (Bailenson, 2021).

Teachers have also reported many instances of using Zoom to good advantage; e.g. SOFLA (synchronous online flipped learning approach; Marshall & Kostka, 2020). Stevens followed up on his eLearning course with an extension podcast which he called TALIN (Teaching and Learning in IsolatioN, since renamed to Teaching and Learning in the New Normal; Stevens, 2021, March 29). This series produced 38 webinars between March 30 to August 16, 2020 involving teachers who were learning to transition from ERT into the new normal (see the TALIN full list of 38 webinars with links to archives, including recordings).

During ERT, TALIN was the main focus of Learning2gether, a podcast initiative started by Vance Stevens in 2010 and which has since archived over 500 episodes. It serves as another example of the category of how teachers already involved in online and blended learning fared best as ERT plunged most of us into the new normal. As with Jeff Lebow's blended learning materials already existing on Blogger for use by fellow teachers and their students, Learning2gether was an existing means of hosting podcasts, through which TALIN could be directed at the immediate problem in early 2020.

One particularly noteworthy expression of this occurred in October, 2020 when Hanaa Khamis enlisted the help of TALIN in mounting what she called a 'Teachers Learning2gether Summit on the New Normal to Survive Lockdown'. This two-day conference was an excellent example of teachers coming together for collaborative professional development 'class roots' style, utilizing whatever free resources they had available. As with many other such conferences of this nature, the presentations were recorded to YouTube and are full of ideas to help colleague teaching peers improve on techniques for engaging and challenging students remotely in the new normal (Stevens, 2020, October 10).

ERC: Emergency Remote Conferencing

Professional organizations have been quick to facilitate sharing among their communities and to provide resources aimed at helping teachers cope with ERT. The traditional way of doing this has been by holding face-to-face conferences, but after a wave of conference cancellations starting in 2020, by 2021 it was becoming apparent that professional organizations themselves were going to have to hold their annual conferences online or not have them at all.

TESOL is a prime example of such an organization. According to Wikipedia Contributors (2021, February 10), "TESOL International Association, formerly Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, is the largest professional organization for teachers of English as a second or foreign language." The present author is a long-time TESOL member and has attended most live in-person international conferences for the previous two decades; hence the examination of TESOL as an instance of how an established and robust professional organization handles a rapid transition from face-to-face conferencing to ERC, emergency remote conferencing.

Having been forced to cancel its 2020 conference in Denver last April and with the pandemic still preventing travel and face-to-face gatherings a year later, TESOL planned an entirely virtual conference in 2021 and enlisted the services of Showcare event managers to host their conference at https://tesolvirtual.tesol.showcare.io/. They decided that most of the presentations would be pre-recorded and to release the recordings at, but not before, the times they were listed in the TESOL 2021 Program eBook.

To get a perspective on the number of pre-recorded vs. live presentations, one can search on 'recorded presentation' in the schedule pdf and see that it returns 357 hits in the program (those designated as either recorded or pre-recorded), vs 73 LIVE events designated in the program by a green graphic indicating that the session was presented synchronously before a live audience. In addition, there were a dozen Round Table events (designated with other green graphics) plus another half dozen panel or academic sessions featuring round tables also held live in Zoom.

Precise numbers of pre-recorded sessions are not possible to determine using just one search term because many pre-recorded sessions were listed as panels, intersection sessions, etc. but there would have been more than the 357 listed as such in the program. Be that as it may, there were four or five times as many pre-recorded sessions as live ones.

278 of the 357 recorded or pre-recorded sessions were listed in the On Demand part of the program, meaning that presenters had prepared presentations and submitted them for inclusion in the program but had planned no interaction around them whatsoever, and they were not scheduled for release at any particular time.

In the program schedule, 247 presentations had live Q & A sessions associated with them, and took place at the designated time in a Showcare text chat widget. 196 of these were found in the Concurrent part of the program, and 51 in the Exhibitor section (and, of course, none in the On Demand section).

For pre-recorded concurrent sessions featuring live Q & A chat, presenters were supposed to come online during the scheduled release time and enter into the text chat widget where they could interact, live but in text, with whomever was watching the presentation recordings. It was assumed that at the appointed time in the schedule, viewers would appear, play the recordings on their own, and then ask questions about them. Unfortunately, to anyone in the text chat, the presence of others in the room was apparent only when questions appeared; there was no list of who was in the room at any given moment, and when questions were asked, the names of all interlocutors were masked (identified only by conference ID numbers) which was like taking questions from ghosts in a darkened room. The author relates what he experienced as a presenter of one such session (Stevens, 2021, March 25):

> *I was only aware of others when they started asking questions, which they did pretty much from the start of the event, questions like, "Is this a live presentation?" and "Where are the handouts?" Some of the attendees must have been playing the videos because eventually a few questions were asked about the videos themselves, which the attendees could not have seen in advance and would have to have been working through for the 55 minutes it took to play the whole thing. I had no idea how many were there, or when they came into the room, or when they left just as silently.*

The chat had its interesting moments, albeit all ephemeral. Someone remarked that this was a poor model of teaching online. Indeed, in the Community of Inquiry Model (CoI, n.d.), the interface was almost completely lacking in social presence "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities." (Garrison, 2009, p. 352)

TESOL had indeed taken on a huge challenge to engage 7000 participants the first time they had attempted something so far reaching and on this scale. But one of the live presentations at the conference, delivered by three presenters (Susan Gaer, Margi Wald, and Amy Pascucci) who had already mounted three CATESOL regional conferences in California, provided interesting insights into what they had learned from that process (Figure 3).

In the session recording, Wald mentioned her own "low emotional engagement due to the lack of in person interaction, lack of two way interaction," in delivering her presentation. She suggested that planners in general "pick platforms that emphasize interactivity."

Figure 3. Presentation details for Gaer, Wald, and Pascucci (2021).

Pascucci couched the presenters' efforts to mount CATESOL online conferences on a SAMR progression (substitution, augmentation, modification, redefinition; see Figure 4). Their own first effort at taking a CATESOL conference online was one of *substitution*, but they upped their game in their next two CATESOL conference efforts as they broached the *augmentation* and *modification* stages in the SAMR model. For the upcoming state conference, Pascucci said they were aiming at *redefinition*, and that their goal for the next CATESOL event was "changing the core and essence of a conference".

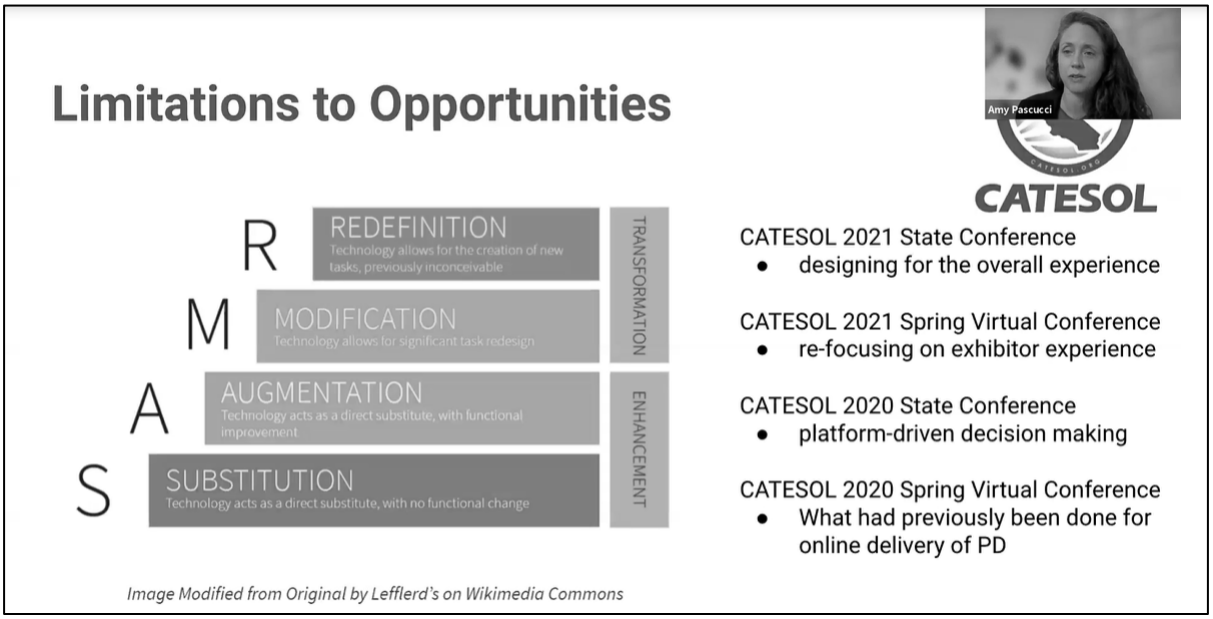

Figure 4. The SAMR model applied to evolving iterations of CATESOL conferences.

Wald added that she missed the human interaction in exhibit areas (and in particular the availability of wine at IATEFL conferences): "The exhibit hall is a great idea for a face to face conference but we found that it just doesn't work very well online."

What are some alternatives, then? At the recent Virtual Round Table Webcon 2021 we learned of Virbela, a company that builds immersive 3D worlds for virtual events. They feature a walkthrough of an immersive virtual exhibition hall in a video on their website (Figure 5).

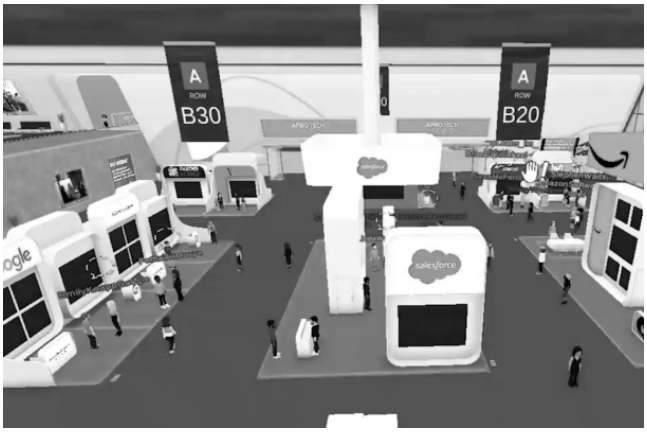

Figure 5. Inside a virtual exhibit hall created by Virbela.

At the same conference we learned from Emma Abbate (letstalkonline, 2021) about Mozilla Hubs, a free 'private' virtual worlds room creator. This would not operate at conference scale, but it would be good for making breakout rooms in case you found yourself in a virtual exhibition hall and wanted to step into a corner and share a conversation with others over a glass of virtual wine (Figure 6).

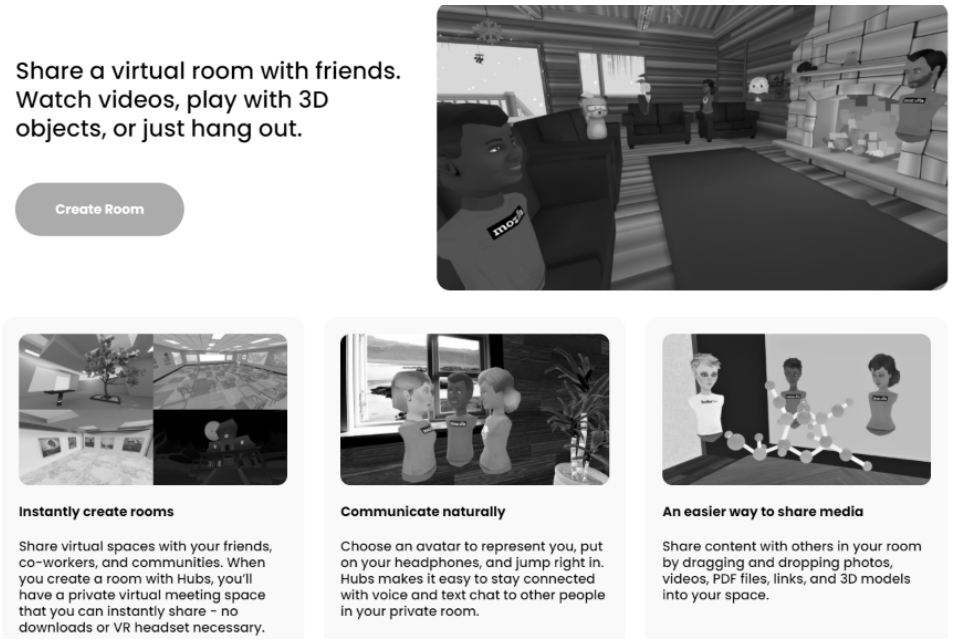

Figure 6. How Hubs is described on the Mozilla Hubs web page.

Virtual Worlds

As with the CATESOL conference organizers, whose first attempt at online conferencing was pitched at the substitution rung on the SAMR model, TESOL conference planners likened their registration process to delegates picking up their badges and program books and

ascending on the grand escalators to the conference suites where they would find the conference itself. That step off the virtual escalator may have lacked the social feel of a live event, but let's imagine what that could look like in a virtual world, something like this for example (Figure 7):

Figure 7. A virtual conference space with an exhibition hall on the right (Pink, 2020).

What if delegates could step off the virtual elevator and come out on a space like this? We're still in substitution, but if we take the door on the right marked Exhibition, we could find ourselves in something like Heike Philp's Virtual Expo at the May, 2020, Virtual Round Table WebCon (Figure 8).

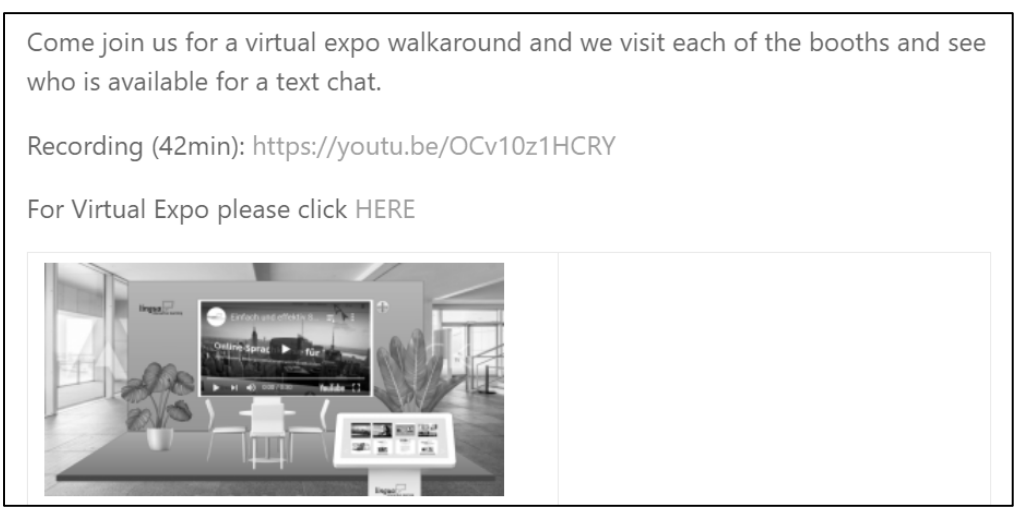

Figure 8. The Virtual Expo from the Virtual Round Table WebCon in May 2020.

If we play the video indicated above (letstalkonline, 2020), we can see how Philp's concept of a Virtual Expo has the potential to take us to the higher levels of the SAMR model. Played from 36 minutes, 8 seconds onwards, we can see where Philp starts in the exhibition area pictured in Figure 9, transports us to the main auditorium in OpenSim, zooms in on the screen

there, and then backs off from the screen and zooms us out the windows and over the campus where the virtual conference is being held.

Figure 9. Play this video queued in this link from 36 min:08 sec to go from the exhibition hall to the conference hall, and then zoom out to the conference campus at large.

Conferences in virtual worlds

The range of possibilities and approaches is quite broad, but virtual worlds, while becoming increasingly popular with educators, have yet to take hold as mainstream platforms in typical classrooms or at typical conferences. When they appear at mainstream events, they are usually relegated to a sideshow.

But not always. There are many instances where conferences held entirely in virtual worlds have focused on language learning as well as on education in general.

One compelling model for virtual classrooms has long been Second Life (Stevens, 2008), with large communities of educators having formed there and in spaces such as OpenSim and Minecraft, frequently involving students in those environments as well. Conferences have often been held in these virtual world spaces; in particular the SLanguages conferences started by Gavin Dudeney in 2007 (Pegrum, 2007; Figure 10), the Virtual Round Table conferences with archives going back to 2009, and Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education with archives extending back to 2010 (Figures 11, 12, and 13).

Figure 10. The first SLanguages auditorium, from Pegrum (2007).

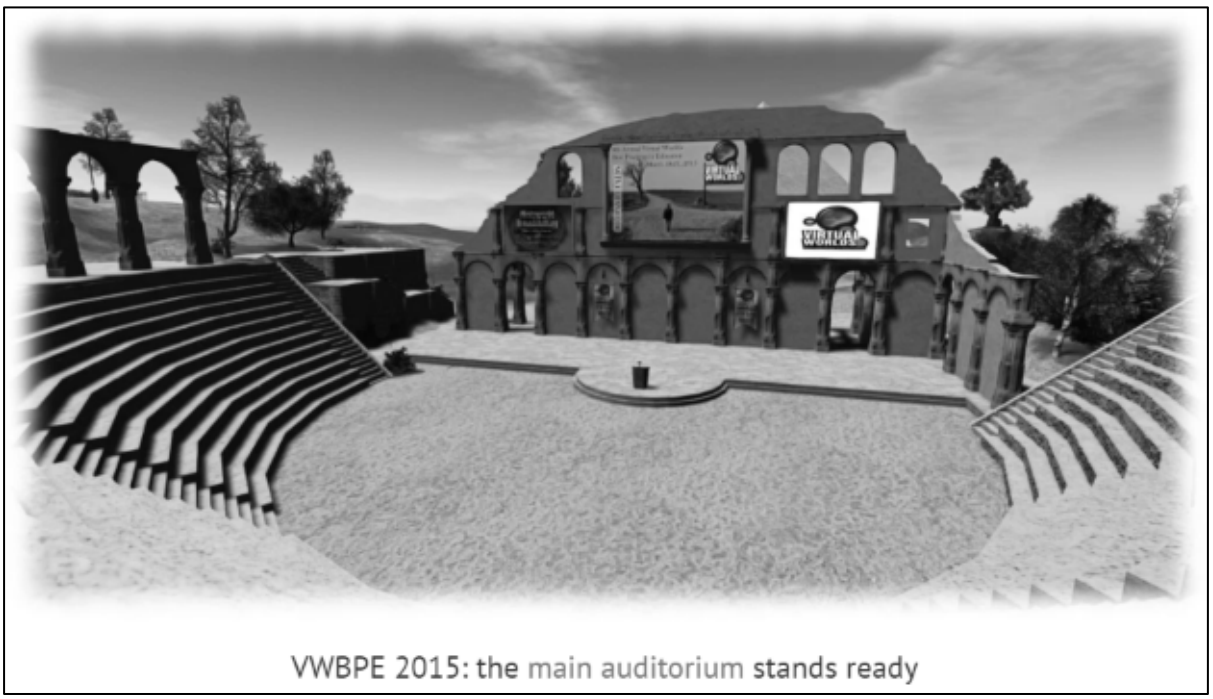

Figure 11. An interesting theme for the VWBPE 2015 main auditorium space (Pey, 2015).

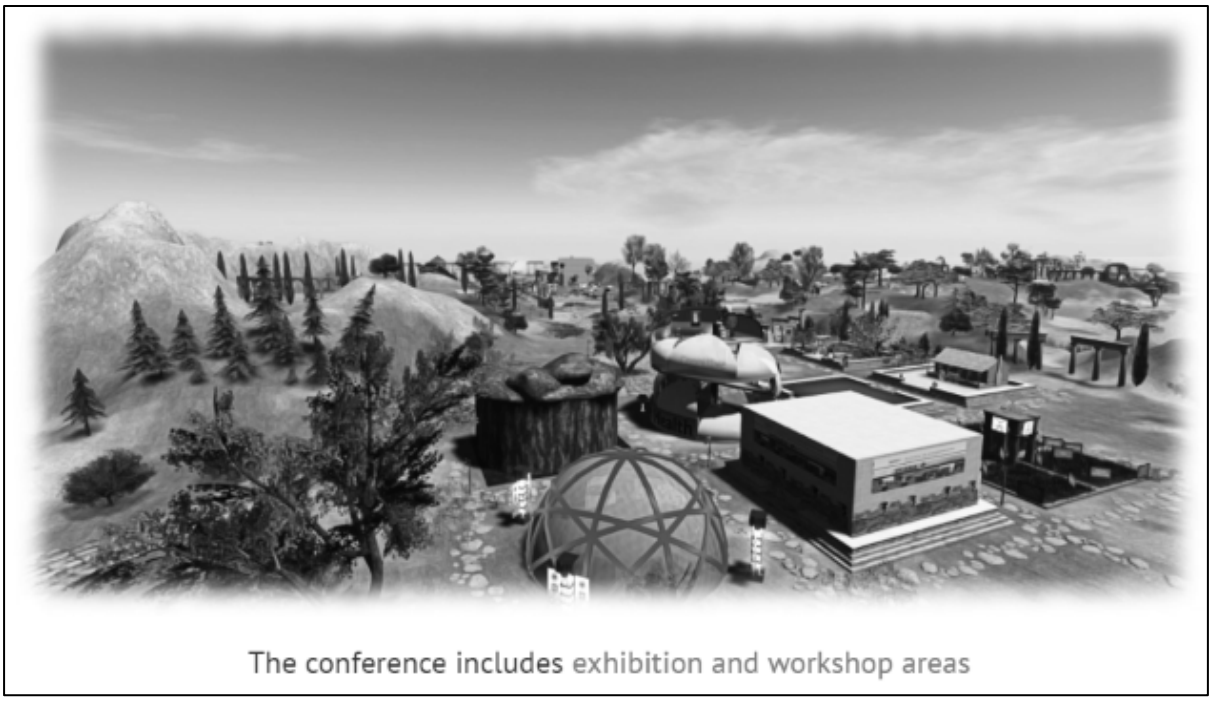

Figure 12. VWBPE 2015 exhibition space, near the forum (Pey, 2015).

Figure 13. Shades of Dune: the <u>VWBPE 2013 central meeting area from Liz Dorland's Flickr stream</u>.

More virtual world conferences are listed in this Wikipedia Virtual world conferences bookmark (the bookmark takes you to the correct section in the article; Wikipedia contributors. 2021, January 28). As we see, virtual worlds have frequently been used as venues for conferences in their own right, but they could also be used as 'floor spaces' for parts of more mainstream virtual conferences that have traditional areas that don't fit well in the selected platform, such as the exhibit hall in virtual TESOL conferences.

Virtual worlds at the TESOL 2021 Virtual Conference

One community fixture at on-site TESOL conferences has long been the Electronic Village (EV), where the Computer-assisted Language Learning Interest Section (CALL-IS) has carved out a niche for networking and hands-on professional development among education technology enthusiasts who travel to TESOL conferences. The first appearance of a CALL-IS 'hospitality room' was in 1986; and this was renamed to EV, or Electronic Village, in 1997 (Stevens, 2015). The EV was a place where conference goers could drop in to get advice, swap tips and software, access the CALL-IS library of software, and attend presentations.

In 2001, CALL-IS created a way for the EV to have an online extension, called Electronic Village Online, or simply EVO (Hanson-Smith & Bauer-Ramazani, 2004). EVO takes place each year as a way for teachers with expertise to share it for free with the wider community (there is no need to be a TESOL member to join sessions). EVO celebrated its 20th anniversary at the recent 2021 TESOL Virtual Conference.

EVO has become one of the longest running MOOCs available to address the professional development of language teachers. Its year starts after each TESOL conference with the installment of the new year's EVO coordination team, followed by a call for proposals for the next year's TESOL sessions. Once these are tentatively accepted in September, prospective moderators engage in four weeks of moderator development in October-November designed to familiarize new moderators with what to expect in the EVO ecosystem. In December, those who have successfully developed their proposals to EVO standards through this process are included in a general call for participants, and the sessions themselves take place for five weeks in January and February.

At the on-site TESOL conferences themselves, CALL-IS has established a strong track record of webcasting CALL-IS and EV events live and 'under the radar' starting as early as 1999. Initially we cobbled together whatever Web 2.0 tools that would do the trick, but eventually we settled on Elluminate / Blackboard Collaborate for our broadcasts. More recently we have been using Zoom but streaming out over CALL-IS YouTube channels via Open Broadcaster Software (Bauer-Ramazani, et al., 2017).

Best of EVO. EVO has often held on-site sessions at TESOL conferences where EVO moderators who were present at the conferences would take the podium and discuss their sessions with live audiences, usually in the EV suite of rooms. According to Bauer-Ramazani et al. (2017), the first EVO joint presentation at a live TESOL conference occurred in 2008, whereas the next one mentioned was not for another seven years, in 2015. The first of these events designated 'best of' appears to have been the Best of EVO in 2016, followed by a

second Best of EVO in 2017. As with all previous EVO presentations, these were made by EVO moderators who had traveled to the conference. Their presentations were webcast out to a virtual audience, as we had been doing regularly for most sessions emanating from the EV each year by then.

The author volunteered to organize the Best of EVO presentations in Chicago in 2018, and again, with Jane Chien, in Atlanta 2019. In these years, the Electronic Village was relocated from its usual suite of rooms (on a floor with the other conference presentations) to the publishers' exhibition area. There, the event would have more prominence than before, and in fact almost double the time was allocated to it, which we were expected to fill. However, for EVO moderators not living in the USA there was little incentive to undertake the expense of travel and accommodation at expensive hotels in a convention city for a cameo appearance in an on-site EVO event, especially when they had held their session online, so that in both 2018 and 2019, the number of EVO moderators planning to be present at the actual conference could be counted on one hand. Therefore, we decided to try a hybrid approach. We had regularly streamed our live presenters out to the world, why not stream them in to the conference as well?

So, at the face-to-face TESOL conferences in Chicago and Atlanta in 2018 and 2019, EVO mounted hybrid 'Best of EVO' performances for the face-to-face audiences at each conference, with some presenters being on site, and many others beaming in via Zoom to present reports on their sessions remotely to the face-to-face conference delegates. The system worked so well that in 2020, when the TESOL conference in Denver was cancelled abruptly, the Best of EVO was the only session of the entire conference, to our knowledge, to be able to present an event that had been accepted for the on-site program completely online, roughly on schedule, and on around the days designated in the original program (Stevens, 2020).

Thus, by the time of the 2021 virtual TESOL conference, and in yet another illustration of the premise that those already well-versed in blended, hybrid, and online teaching would be best prepared to cope with having to retool quickly to adapt to the demands of a virtual environment, CALL-IS was in an excellent position to carry out its own free and open presentation track parallel to, yet apart from, the main TESOL conference.

Virtual Worlds in CALL-IS EV at TESOL 2021. The virtual EV sideshow was anchored at the CALL-IS 2021 portal page, where one of the tabs takes you to the CALL-IS 2021 schedule. This schedule, which listed presentations on all the EVO sessions in 2021, including demonstrations of virtual worlds, provides the most succinct and comprehensive overview of what offerings there were on the EV side of the most recent TESOL virtual conference.

Some EV presentations were mounted asynchronously through ten minute videos uploaded to the EV TESOL 2021 FlipGrid (the maximum length allowed on Flipgrid; see Figure 14). However, synchronous Q & A sessions were arranged for presenters to discuss their presentations live in Zoom (whereas on the main TESOL conference, live Q & A sessions

were carried out in text chat widgets). This created a critical difference in 'presence' because, during CALL-IS events, participants could know who one another were and form a sense of interpersonal relationship.

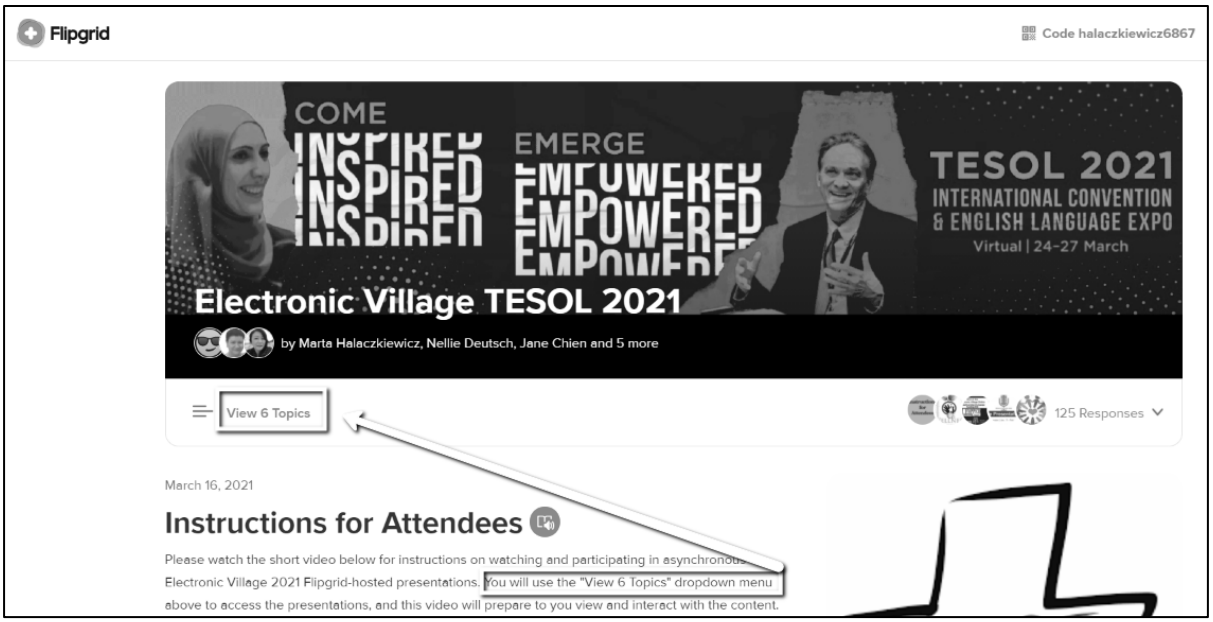

Figure 14. The EV TESOL 2021 Flipgrid landing page, highlighting the key to viewing the videos themselves.

The 'Virtual Worlds Demonstration' presentations made cases for Second Life, OpenSim, and Minecraft as spaces not only to attract educators intent on learning from one another but as fruitful platforms benefiting students. Descriptions of some of these sessions are given below.

Heike Philp presented on OpenSim in ELT meant to "showcase how you might use OpenSim for English language learning and immersive storytelling." This was a particularly powerful demonstration of the rich creativity and interactivity of OpenSim to tease target language narratives out of second language learners. Doris Molero talked about adapting fan fiction to her virtual worlds where students are able rewrite and recreate endings and play out their scenarios in OpenSim. Doris's explanation starts at 19:09 in the video recorded at this event (CALL Interest Section – TESOL, 2021, March 26).

Randall Sadler, Heike Philp, Dennis Newson, Alicja Bomirska, Helena Galani, Doris Molero, Helen Myers, and Amany Alkhayat presented a Best of EVO panel on Immersive storytelling in virtual worlds, described in the program thusly:

> *Storytelling is a wonderful means of getting our students excited. Recreating such a story in a virtual world would provide a great setting for roleplay and fanfiction. Yet, how difficult is it to recreate scenes of Alice in Wonderland, Harry Potter or King Arthur and his Round Table in OpenSim? What about character creation? Changing avatar outfit, clothes and accessories? When creating the scene, what building skills are required and when it comes to storytelling, what skills are required to come up with a captivating story?*

These main three challenges will be addressed in this EVO session and we hope to recreate a story in OpenSim.

Minecraft figured prominently in the virtual worlds demonstrations. There was a pre-recorded presentation on the 7th consecutive EVO Minecraft MOOC session for which the present author had recorded game play during the 2021 session and extracted 13 video snippets illustrating half a dozen affordances of Minecraft for language learning. The author created a wiki to explain where those affordances were addressed in each of the 13 segments chosen for the recording (Stevens, 2021, March 25; see Figure 15).

Figure 15. Slide 12 (Stevens, 2021, April 19) showing why video segment #8 included in the presentation, illustrated one or more of the 7 affordances listed on the right (Stevens, 2021, April 10).

In addition, four of the five panelists at the CALL-IS EV Virtual Worlds for ELT panel presented that same day were co-moderators of EVO Minecraft MOOC (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Panelists for the Virtual Worlds for ELT panel, from (Stevens, 2021, March 25).

The following day, there was a half hour Best of EVO presentation by EVO Minecraft MOOC moderators followed by an hour long Minecraft server tour that formed the backdrop of a stimulating discussion between EVO Minecraft MOOC co-moderators Aaron Schwartz, Don Carroll, Jane Chien, Marijana Smolčec, Rose Bard, and Vance Stevens on the role of Minecraft in language learning (Stevens, 2021, March 27). Working from closed captions of the video recording (Stevens, 2021, March 27, Video file) the present author made a transcript of the entire conversation (which can be found in Stevens, 2021, March 27, Google Doc) and from that, gleaned additional affordances of Minecraft for language learning.

The links below point to section headings in Stevens (2021, April 17), where the author grouped topics from the conversation according to additional ways that Minecraft helps learners hone their language communication skills, according to what was said by the teachers in the recording.

1. Autonomy
2. Computer literacy skills
3. Critical thinking
4. Departure from traditional teaching and learning
5. Family and community
6. Motivation
7. Opportunities for language acquisition

8. Typing skills
9. Understanding accented language
10. Using language for reflection
11. Vocabulary and spelling

Minecraft as a venue for virtual conferences

Our qualitative data suggest that using Minecraft to help language learners develop their language skills has value in language learning quite apart from comparable virtual worlds such as Second Life and OpenSim. But whereas the former are often used to gather academics together in virtual worlds, Minecraft is relatively untried as a conference venue.

According to HSE University News (2020) the Minecraft Higher School of Economics at HSE University, Russia, held a Game Mechanics Conference on July 5, 2020 in Minecraft and Discord. The event included "lectures, round tables, a Minecraft quest, prizes, and much more." The event aimed itself at "the innovative format of holding a conference about how to develop games in a game" (Figures 17 and 18).

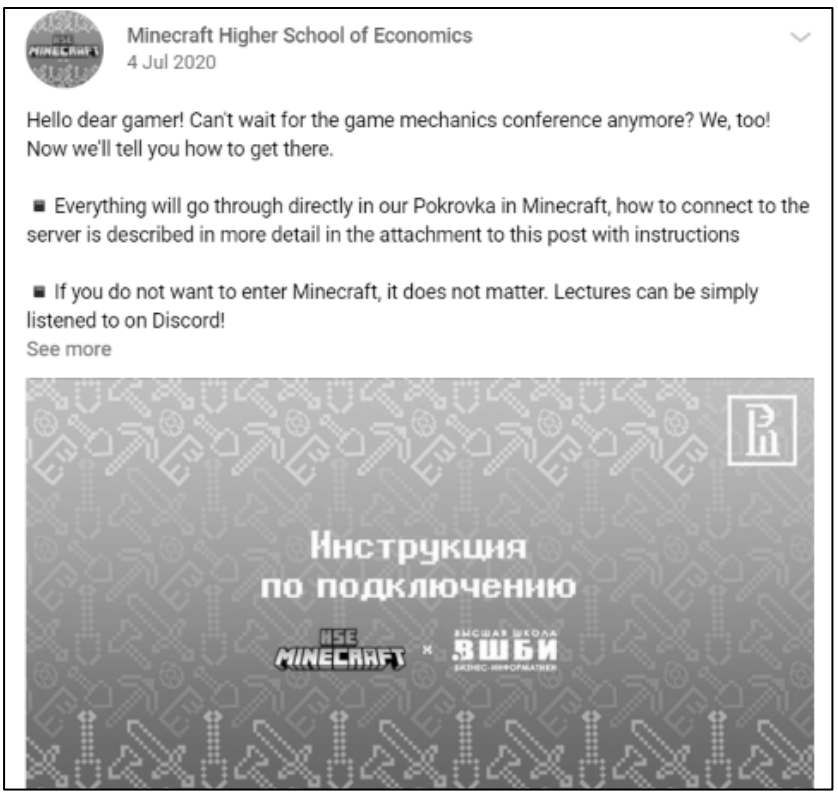

Figure 17. Part of the buildup to the Game Mechanics conference, from the Facebook-like https://vk.com/hseminecraft.

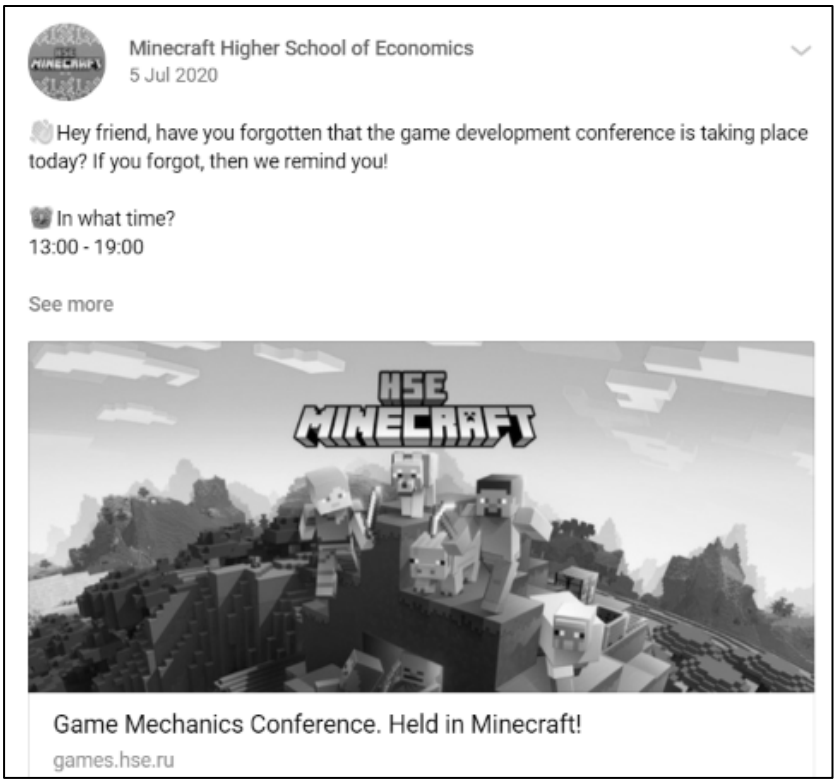

Figure 18. The big day arrives, from https://vk.com/hseminecraft.

The event was a project of HSE Minecraft which, according to their website,

> *is a full-fledged platform both for holding open days, parties and concerts, and for organizing lectures, seminars and other training sessions. If there was sometimes not enough space for student potential live, now we have built an online space where there will be a place for everyone's imagination and creativity!*

Why are conferences in Minecraft such a rarity? Second Life and OpenSim have certain advantages as conference venues over Minecraft. Users can obtain logins to Second Life and OpenSim for free, and access to both worlds is relatively straightforward; you just need to install the software and click on a SLURL (a Second Life URL) to access a location in Second Life; and the process for OpenSim is similar (very similar; once in-world, it's sometimes hard for users to tell if they are in Second Life or OpenSim). Minecraft on the other hand requires a purchased login, and users might have to be whitelisted before they can be allowed onto a server (which means the organizers have to know participant user IDs in advance and key the users in individually, or change security settings on specific areas of the server; whereas in Second Life or OpenSim invited participants can normally just turn up without such considerations).

On the other hand, developing and maintaining worlds in Second Life and Open Sim can be expensive for developers. You can explore for free but if you want to build you have to become a premium member (around $10 a month) and arrange for land to build on, which would cost at minimum $4/month for the smallest possible parcel to hundreds of dollars,

monthly (Second Life pricing list, 2009). A secure OpenSim account obtained through Kitely might run $60/month, though a plain vanilla OpenSim grid should cost less (see Figure 19).

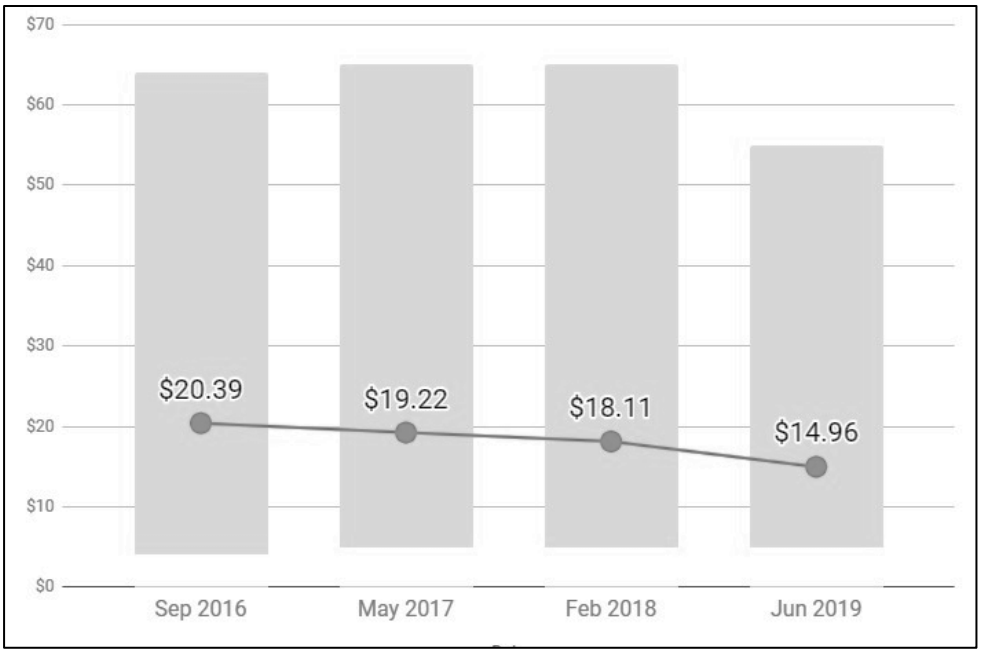

Figure 19. Average prices of a standard region on OpenSim grids per month (Korolov, 2019).

Keeping in mind that these are minimal costs, enough capability on Second Life or OpenSim to mount a conference could multiply those costs considerably, not to mention the time and expertise required to develop your space. Minecraft on the other hand has no ongoing fees. A login credential costs users less than $30 (one time only) and for the Java edition, allows download of any client or server software.

Also, Philp (personal communication, April 28, 2021) points out the limitations on "how many virtual guests can be part of a virtual conference in virtual worlds, ie. 40 max avatars in OpenSim, 100 on a full region in SL, 400 if you put 4 regions together (VWBPE does this) etc. These restrictions hamper any kind of conferences in virtual environments, but to be precise there (ie. I believe Virbela can hold 1000)." Of course, these would be limitations on participants in-world; many more participate in such conferences, including ones held simply in Zoom, through the streams hosted by the organizers.

There is, in theory, no upper limit on the number of players who can be on a Minecraft server running Java, though according to Meeks (2019; Figure 20), a practical limit with a powerful server setup might be:

> *up to 100K players, and it's hard to even get that many on at one time on a server. What you really need to have is the hardware to run the server, basically a very powerful PC, lots of Ram, an SSD for your storage, and a good cooling solution.*

Figure 20. Server array pictured by Meeks (2019) to support 100k users at one time on a server.

But for a more modest academic conference, it is at least good to know that the limits are not in the game but in your server setup. An upper limit can be set in the server.properties file but this number can be whatever the server can support with its available bandwidth and memory (and that number is limited to 30 if you are running Bedrock or Education Edition). If these can be dealt with then the number of participants on a server running the Java version would in theory (though not in practice) be limitless.

Bringing this back down to earth, what if you don't have an array of multiple CPUs available to you, like the one shown in Figure 20? Aaron Schwarz (a.k.a. Zzidkha on Discord) was asked how many users our normal, nothing-fancy, single-cpu computer acting as our EVO Minecraft MOOC Java host server would support. He hasn't pushed the upper limits, but he said it happily supports 20 users on 6 GB of RAM (Figure 21).

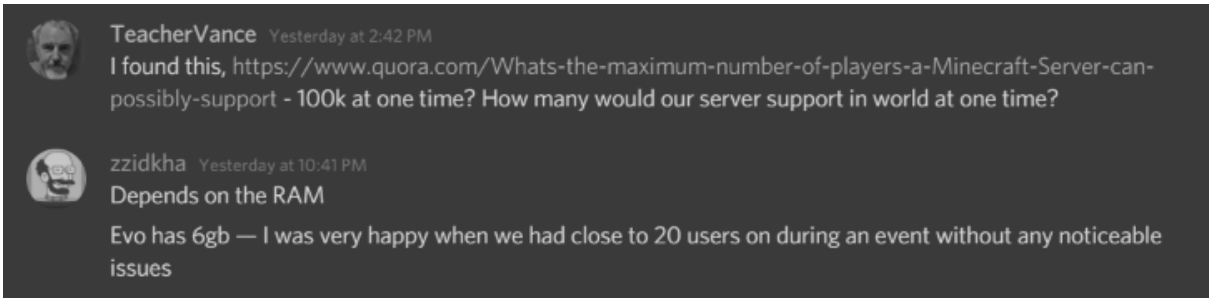

Figure 21. The EVO Minecraft MOOC server easily manages 20 users on 6 GB of RAM.

As a platform for virtual events, Minecraft also has the advantages mentioned in Zhang (2020), who elicited the following in an interview with one of the volunteer organizers of several Minecraft festivals.

> *Minecraft is super open—you can do pretty much whatever you want with it. It's worked really well for us in terms of being able to build these absurd, crazy virtual worlds that you*

can't find anywhere else. It's also the best-selling game of all time, so most people either have it or know someone who has it. There's a lot of custom software that has to be written for the events we throw, but it's not super difficult to just run your own Minecraft server with some friends, which is how this all started.

Despite the hurdles, this suggests that Minecraft has some potential for being a viable conference venue for people who are already in it, or willing to join (or alternatively, willing to interact in the stream). And although academic conferences are uncommon in Minecraft now, many events have been staged there. Recordings of these events allow us to glimpse what a more formal conference there could look like.

Several music festivals have been held in Minecraft already, such as the Coalchella festival in 2018, and the series of Fire Festivals that followed that success (not to be confused with the real-life Coachella and Fyre festivals; as described in Gordon, 2019).

Roughan's video (2019) of his entry into the Fire Festival that year (apart from the jarring sound track, easily muted) is reminiscent of previous examples of exploring exhibition halls and other spaces associated with academic conferences (Figure 22).

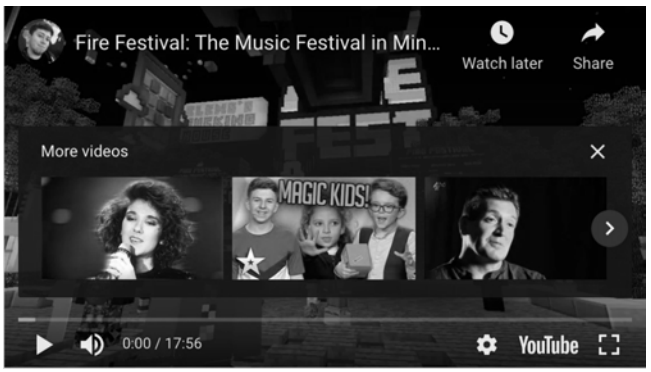

Figure 22. Entry into the Fire Festival reveals what a conference held in Minecraft could look like (Roughan, 2019); if you feel the choice of music is not 'academic', just mute it.

The video shows how a participant enters the venue and chooses a door (in this case a 'warp' that could be labeled Exhibition area, for example). This teleports the participant to a walkway where other avatars are milling about. The walkway leads invitingly into the main area where people are gathering. There could be kiosks here, or presentation spaces, or whatever the conference experience calls for.

Minecraft has more recently been used as an alternative to other events cancelled by COVID-19. Lim (2020) cites several instances where real world events impacted by COVID-19, have shifted into Minecraft, noting that "many institutions saw the world of Minecraft as an opportunity to host events digitally — exploiting its flexibility and accessibility, it allows for anything to be built and anyone to enter the virtual world." Lim gives as one example where the president of South Korea and his wife gave a tour in Minecraft of a mock up of their residence for children in advance of a Children's Day

holiday, and that "schools, hospitals, police stations, fire stations and many other buildings were available in Minecraft for children to explore."

Other events have been moved spontaneously into Minecraft by those impacted, especially by students wishing to emulate the social significance of milestones in their lives lost through the onset of pandemic. For example, a number of commencements have been held online. Lim notes where

> *Two Boston University seniors, Rudy Raveendran and Warren Partridge, created Quaranteen University, a virtual university in Minecraft. Any 2020 graduating student can join online in the ceremony scheduled for May 22. Raveendran got the idea from Japanese elementary school students who hosted an online graduation in Minecraft that went viral in March.*

The latter example is described in greater detail in BBC Newsround (2020). Anderson (2020) writes about how graduating students at Penn State, inspired by the foregoing examples, came together in Minecraft to create their virtual graduation experience (Figure 23).

Figure 23. A school has closed, but is made accessible to students virtually via Minecraft (Anderson (2020).

Anderson describes the care, precision, and creativity that students applied to recreating their campus:

> *'Penncraft' students began to recreate dormitories, food trucks, and local sculptures in-game. Makarios Chung, an early builder, measured buildings' dimensions and streets positions constantly to ensure their scale was as accurate as possible. The first day of building, students took an hour to decide the placement of one street. Their main goal was to have a completed campus, specifically Locust Street, for graduating seniors to walk down in-game now that COVID-19 ensured they wouldn't return to campus and complete this UPenn tradition.*

Figure 24 shows an example of the Pencraft students' work:

Figure 24. "The Fisher Fine Arts Library at the University of Pennsylvania. Photo by chrisinphilly5448; Minecraft screenshot by Makarios Chung" (Anderson, 2020).

Remacle (2019) speculates on the idea: "What Could a Conference inside Minecraft Look like? I imagine we could create spaces and features inside Minecraft that would allow us to learn, share and act together." Remacle admits that she hasn't started to act on her idea, but websites exist where others have put more thought into the matter; eg. Empire Minecraft's (2020) user manual on creating and running player events.

The present author, looking forward to his 8th session next January as lead moderator of EVO Minecraft MOOC (Stevens, 2021, April 7) has got the idea to hold what may well be the first ever free, online, international one-day conference for English language teachers ever held in Minecraft. This is not a promise, but rather a challenge to ourselves to try and pull it off (Figure 25).

If this inspires you, you are welcome to join us and help us build it, or attend as an avatar or as a viewer if we get that far along in our plans. Details are sure to be posted at http://missions4evomc.pbworks.com/.

Figure 25. Fanciful mock-up of an EVO Minecraft MOOC 2022 one-day virtual world languages conference in Minecraft.

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About the Author

Vance Stevens is founder/coordinator of Learning2gether.net and served as On the Internet section editor of TESL-EJ from 2002-2021. He has helped co-coordinate TESOL/CALL-IS Electronic Village Online (EVO) since 2003, and has co-moderated EVO Minecraft MOOC since 2015. He was recently awarded the 2019 CALL Research Conference Lifetime Achievement Award.

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Appendix

There appears below an alphabetical list of text in the article with underlying links spelled out. If you are listening to this in a text-to-speech reader, you can stop your reader at this point.

Best of EVO in 2016	http://callis2016.pbworks.com/w/page/104238917/The%20Electronic%20Village%20Online
Best of EVO in 2017	http://callis2017.pbworks.com/w/page/114456526/The%20Electronic%20Village%20Online%3A%20Best%20of%202017%20March%2022%201%3A20pm
CALL-IS 2021 TESOLportal page	https://sites.google.com/view/electronicvillage2021/home
CALL-IS 2021 TESOL schedule	https://call-is.org/ev/2021/schedule.html
chrisinphilly5448	https://tinyurl.com/chrisinphilly-OTI
Doris's explanation starts at 19:09	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhz8vdXlrrQ&t=1149s
Electronic Village Online	http://evosessions.pbworks.com/
EVO joint presentation at TESOL in 2008	http://academics.smcvt.edu/cbauer-ramazani/TESOL/2008/EV-Fair-Classics/schedule.htm
EVO joint presentation at TESOL, in 2015	http://callis2015.pbworks.com/w/page/92473770/Electronic%20Village%20Online%202015
EV TESOL 2021 FlipGrid	https://flipgrid.com/halaczkiewicz6867
HSE Minecraft	https://www.hse.ru/minecraft/#who
http://missions4evomc.pbworks.com/	http://missions4evomc.pbworks.com/

https://tesolvirtual.tesol.showcare.io/	https://tesolvirtual.tesol.showcare.io/
https://vk.com/hseminecraft	https://vk.com/hseminecraft
Immersive storytelling in virtual worlds	http://evo2021proposals.pbworks.com/w/page/141326307/Immersive%20Storytelling%20in%20Virtual%20Worlds
Learning2gether	https://learning2gether.net/
Mozilla Hubs	https://hubs.mozilla.com/
Showcare	https://www.showcare.com/
TALIN full list of 38 webinars with links to archives	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SCMVUGgGXIPOVHru54Jd-KcvCL-R1U_9DieCZ1U2RXg/edit#heading=h.wqv9ty7zzl1l
TESOL	https://www.tesol.org/
TESOL 2021 Program eBook	https://cms-tesol.ae-admin.com/docs/default-source/tesol-convention/tesol-2021-program-book_final.pdf
Video queued in this link from 36 min:08 sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCv10z1HCRY&t=2168s
Virbela	https://www.virbela.com/
Virtual Round Table conferences with archives going back to 2009	https://virtual-round-table.com/main-venue-show-and-tell-2
Virtual Round Table Webcon 2021	http://bit.ly/12vrtwebcon
Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education with archives extending back to 2010	https://www.vwbpe.org/archives

VWBPE 2013 central meeting area from Liz Dorland's Flickr stream	https://www.flickr.com/photos/ldinstl/9378871703/in/photostream
Wikipedia Virtual world conferences bookmark	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_world_language_learning#Virtual_world_conferences

Additional ways that Minecraft helps learners hone their language communication skills, according to teachers reported in Stevens (2021, April 17).

1. Autonomy – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.mnli4xxuzug9
2. Computer literacy skills – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.bwsk2bnmawzk
3. Critical thinking – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.igyykzcpsrq7
4. Departure from traditional teaching and learning – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.b3wlc5xi7nk
5. Family and community – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.yulmueqeyobk
6. Motivation – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.wz045da6d7ya
7. Opportunities for language acquisition – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.1464xrzgk37h
8. Typing skills – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.395et1wacbl8
9. Understanding accented language – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.e1fg9k5srl26

10. Using language for reflection – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.udurql585q7r
11. Vocabulary and spelling – https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DPsJ6C3_tLLarXPMytSr9OBKZfmqnKd2NWItiWmkinE/edit#heading=h.eq9an8iy0mtt