Interview with Fiona Phillips ("Yasmar Arida")

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Conducted in Second Life on November 13, 2008

[13:50] Yasmar Arida is Online
[13:52] JeffreyC Nightfire: How are you?
[13:52] Yasmar Arida: I'm well!
[13:52] Yasmar Arida: What time is it there?
[13:52] JeffreyC Nightfire: Great. Thanks again for agreeing to an interview
[13:53] JeffreyC Nightfire: I'm glad it looks like I did my math right
[13:53] Yasmar Arida: Do you have voice chat enabled?
[13:53] JeffreyC Nightfire: I'm fairly new to SL to be honest
[13:54] JeffreyC Nightfire: And I don't get to spend as much time in here as I'd like
[13:54] JeffreyC Nightfire: Do you mind doing the interview via chat?
[13:54] Yasmar Arida: Yes that has been our problem too.
[13:54] Yasmar Arida: No that will be fine
[13:54] JeffreyC Nightfire: Ok, great. Well, I have some questions
[13:55] JeffreyC Nightfire: First off, are you using Second Life both for teaching and research?
Yasmar Arida: The birds here are singing in the same key!! Cool

Yasmar Arida: Yes - sorry we are.

Yasmar Arida: We have firstly applied for what is here a Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant

Yasmar Arida: This was the first stage which saw us exploring virtual worlds

JeffreyC Nightfire: That's right. You mentioned that in your email.

Yasmar Arida: we were particularly interested in simulations and creative ways of sharing and completing collaborative works of art

JeffreyC Nightfire: When you say collaborative works of art, what do you mean?

Yasmar Arida: We have a Virtual Gallery on our Island and a Festival space

Yasmar Arida: The students make art works (visual and sound) in the real world

Yasmar Arida: These are then uploaded and streamed into SL

Yasmar Arida: We meet in-world as a tutorial group and then discuss the ways in which the art works connect.

JeffreyC Nightfire: So art works could be musical compositions, or paintings, or perhaps graphic art?

Yasmar Arida: The art works are then attached to prims

Yasmar Arida: Jenny was very interested in the 3D ways in which vis art can be displayed and I was interested in the way that sound can be part of the environment

JeffreyC Nightfire: I see. Very interesting.

Yasmar Arida: Sorry in answer to your question - yes - we call them installations

JeffreyC Nightfire: Gotcha.

Yasmar Arida: The Other way we use SL is for alternative tutorial space

Yasmar Arida: We have quite large numbers of off-campus and Overseas students undertaking studies in Education

JeffreyC Nightfire: I see. So, by tutorial space you mean a virtual area where you can conduct classes, lectures and so forth?

Yasmar Arida: SL offers us a great way of providing Community for these students
[14:03] Yasmar Arida: In answer to your question - not so much lecture - more opportunity to chat and discuss- a little more informally


[14:04] Yasmar Arida: All of the material the is offered to students in our 'blackboard situation' called here at Deakin Deakin Studies On-line, in available to students in SL

[14:05] Yasmar Arida: DSO is a little bland and we were also keen to explore the concepts of e-learning further


[14:05] Yasmar Arida: Yes it works really well for us at the moment

[14:06] Yasmar Arida: We simply have computers set up in each of our discipline areas with links to the blackboard site

[14:06] JeffreyC Nightfire: Now, as for the students - I assume the distance ed students are higher education students

[14:06] Yasmar Arida: Yes

[14:06] JeffreyC Nightfire: Are the other students who create the art works also higher ed students?

[14:07] Yasmar Arida: They are usually Grad dip or Masters or completing our units in another country

[14:08] Yasmar Arida: Jenny and I have two undergraduate units and one post graduate unit

[14:08] JeffreyC Nightfire: I'm sorry, I'm guessing maybe we use a little different terminology here in the States. What do you mean by Grad dip?

[14:08] Yasmar Arida: Graduate Diploma

[14:08] JeffreyC Nightfire: Ok. So would that be undergraduate?

[14:09] Yasmar Arida: Here students would complete a three year undergraduate degree in arts or science or maths or business and then if they wiish to teach they would complete a one or two year graduate diplome in either primary education or Secondary education

[14:10] JeffreyC Nightfire: I see. And then a Masters would come after that?

[14:10] Yasmar Arida: The two year course is a graduate Diploma in primary and secondary

[14:10] Yasmar Arida: Yes a msters would come after that. But the landscape is changing.
JeffreyC Nightfire: So, how long have you been using SL in your teaching and research?

Yasmar Arida: We are just now in the process of developing a masters of teaching with specialisms. This will be the course where we will build in a Second life part.

Yasmar Arida: Only about 18 months.

Yasmar Arida: We had difficulty initially breaking through the Deakin Firewall.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Ok. And what is your overall impression of Second Life as a teaching tool?

Yasmar Arida: Once we had had a look around and decided we liked what we saw we then set about finding someone with building and scripting skills.

Yasmar Arida: We knew we not going to learn this sort of thing over-night and our funding structure required us to report asap.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Sure. Funders always want to see results.

Yasmar Arida: The project was structured around a number of linked themes.

Yasmar Arida: Theoretical constructs; concepts of e-learning in a virtual environment.

Yasmar Arida: The physical environment; development of a teaching presence in SL.

Yasmar Arida: Technical infrastructure and support systems.

Yasmar Arida: Teaching and learning in arts education Vis art Drama Dance and Music.

Yasmar Arida: The participant experience research and reporting.

JeffreyC Nightfire: I'm assuming the technical infrastructure was to support the other goals?

Yasmar Arida: Yes - we have here an Institute of teaching and Learning who were invited onto the project to support.

Yasmar Arida: They are connected then to KMD - Knowledge Media devision - who helped with suggesting how to upload and what sorts of files to use. In this area we also had someone who had worked with bumpmap before.

Yasmar Arida: Sorry - spelling is bad 'use'.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Would you say Second Life has been an effective teaching tool?

JeffreyC Nightfire: no problem.
The second Stage of the project began in First semester with the first group of students in our discipline based units Music and Visual Art, creating an avatar and then meeting in-world. The students were able to choose whether they were going to complete and exhibit their work in SL. They found it very useful for on-line discussion outside of class time and met here quite regularly to discuss their works and their teaching strategies. It was also very effective for those who wanted to see and hear other student work but could not because they were studying in off campus mode. It was interesting to see the students who took up the option. We have some dedicated computers here at Deakin for SL. They have firewall access and larger graphics cards.

Do you think that SL provides these opportunities for students in a way that a regular Web presence or say the Blackboard system cannot?

We had been using e-live for off campus tutorials but it was very 'boring'.

SL provides students with the opportunity to create a persona - they have considerable choice in how they represent themselves.

These choices both reflect and create cultural contexts.

And this seems to enhance their learning experience?

Jenny's unit called visual culture explores this sense of self and cultural identity. What proficiencies, presences or tastes are brought to bear? What will reactions to these choices be? how do students, who are going to be teachers, react to these very visual representations?

We are looking at the data from the student polls at the moment to see the reaction of students to learning in this environment.

I see. Any early indications about how they thought it went?

The 'Net - Gen' is still a little way off coming through the university here and we think we might see more students who have been exposed to other virtual games and immersive environments.

come to the university and take up the option
Yasmar Arida: early indications reveal that students who chose the option really enjoyed the immersive environment.

JeffreyC Nightfire: How many students chose to use SL in their class experience?

Yasmar Arida: They liked the roles that they could play.

Yasmar Arida: They also liked the way in which they could 'speak more openly because it was my avatar speaking'.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Very interesting.

Yasmar Arida: 'It was fun and I particularly liked meeting by the fire or going for a boat ride through the caverns. Sooo much more inspiring than the 'portables'!' These have been some of the comments.

Yasmar Arida: You need to understand that our real world environment is pretty 'third world'. The virtual world is so much more engaging and was one of the factors in our choosing it as a learning environment - it would bring back a sense of enchantment!

JeffreyC Nightfire: Aha.

JeffreyC Nightfire: So by "portables" you mean portable classrooms?

Yasmar Arida: Part of teaching is preparing the space for learning. I am hoping that student will become proficient at building and will create their own examples of learning centres for the real world.

Yasmar Arida: Yes portable classrooms - from the 80s transported to the site when the university first began.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Ok. Gotcha.

JeffreyC Nightfire: So...

JeffreyC Nightfire: does it seem accurate to say that the general consensus among the students who participated in using SL in their classroom experience found it to enhance and further stimulate their learning experience?

Yasmar Arida: I would say yes. They also found it empowering.

Yasmar Arida: You would need to come to the Island and see the Visual art Gallery and hear the works! It would be a long time since student have had their work on display like this.

Yasmar Arida: They explore and comment on each others works. They ask each other for copies so that they can use them as resources in their own teaching.

JeffreyC Nightfire: I would love to check it out. Is there a slurl? Is it open to the public?
[14:41] Yasmar Arida: No - this is another area that we are investigating - behaviour of students in second life and a set of regulations for visitors of the island. Until this has been developed further the University have it open by invitation only.

[14:42] Yasmar Arida: All you would have to do is give us your avatar name and we would then invite you to the island in the same way that we have done today.

[14:42] JeffreyC Nightfire: Sure. That seems to be the approach by other schools as well, including University of Florida.

[14:42] Yasmar Arida: I think it is the safest way.

[14:43] JeffreyC Nightfire: Sure. Ok, should I send it to someone in an email, or just tell you?

[14:43] Yasmar Arida: There is a lot of great intellectual property on display on our island that should be protected. The criminology guys at our Uni are looking into all of this.

[14:44] Yasmar Arida: I'll pass it onto Jenny and send you an invitation.


[14:44] Yasmar Arida: When would you like me to do this?

[14:45] JeffreyC Nightfire: Oh, I see, is it something I need to schedule a time for?

[14:45] Yasmar Arida: No, I just need to clear it with Jenny.

[14:45] JeffreyC Nightfire: Oh, ok. It's certainly no rush. Like I said I don't get in here as often as I'd like.

[14:46] JeffreyC Nightfire: But I would love to see the students work and your area if it's possible.

[14:46] Yasmar Arida: I can do this as soon as I see her today - we are in the middle of marking!!

[14:46] JeffreyC Nightfire: Marking... grading?

[14:47] Yasmar Arida: We are responsible here for uploading of marks, yes grades.


[14:47] Yasmar Arida: This is a great place - where are we?

[14:47] JeffreyC Nightfire: You've touched on a few challenges already; what are the obstacles you've encountered or see with using Second Life as a teaching tool?

[14:47] JeffreyC Nightfire: This used to be the UF library.

[14:48] JeffreyC Nightfire: They recently changed it.

[14:48] JeffreyC Nightfire: By library I really just mean a building that served as a virtual presence.
[14:48] Yasmar Arida: One is the broadband access and/or hardware requirements


[14:49] Yasmar Arida: The other has been the access through the firewall and some that don't understand the virtual world and the possibilities for teaching and learning

[14:50] Yasmar Arida: The other has been the need to have administrator rights to your computer so that you can download the updates of the client

[14:50] JeffreyC Nightfire: When you say "some," do you mean other teachers, administrators, technical staff?

[14:50] Yasmar Arida: We have found voice work quite well if the numbers in your tutorial are small

[14:52] Yasmar Arida: There are some educators that are more connected to the past and have not even embraced the blackboard system!

[14:52] Yasmar Arida: Money and continuing to get funding for the project will become more of an ongoing issue for us

[14:53] JeffreyC Nightfire: Sure. So they don't really see the value of Second Life or a reason to explore it? Does this cause push back?

[14:54] Yasmar Arida: There are some who are beginning to see and our project has recently had a great deal more positive exposure, so the project is looking more robust

[14:54] JeffreyC Nightfire: Aha

[14:54] Yasmar Arida: We are also beginning to invite other colleagues from other schools

[14:55] JeffreyC Nightfire: I imagine support, or a lack thereof, is more of a factor as it relates to administrators who oversee project approval or allocation of resources?

[14:55] Yasmar Arida: The School of Journalism and criminology are on board and there are some in business and Law that may join us

[14:56] JeffreyC Nightfire: Great!

[14:56] Yasmar Arida: Yes - we really wish to explore the link between iTunes U and dissemination of materials to students

[14:58] Yasmar Arida: There are some who are worried about student attendance at lectures and tutorials - but I think that students will learn wherever they are and we need to celebrate the diversity of learning experiences that students have the opportunity to be a part of

[14:59] JeffreyC Nightfire: Do you mean they are concerned that students won't attend real-world lectures and tutorials because they will only attend the ones in Second Life?
Yasmar Arida: In SL when teaching - we will be exploring how social worlds replicate existing models of teaching. How such worlds adapt and transform them and how or if, social worlds introduce entirely new forms of teaching.

Yasmar Arida: Yes they will be concerned about that.

JeffreyC Nightfire: So, you and your colleagues at Deakin who are involved with using SL as a teaching tool will be using your teaching experiences for the basis of this research?

Yasmar Arida: We will be involved in recognising the presence of the familiar teaching and learning models, and looking at the ways in which the contexts of learning, and the specific features of immersive social worlds, impact on these models.

Yasmar Arida: Sorry 'contexts'.

Yasmar Arida: How are phenomena such as exploration, sociability, resource building and sharing, diversity and mentoring facilitated of constrained in these worlds?

Yasmar Arida: Is conceiving SL as a 'world' actually useful?

JeffreyC Nightfire: I see. And so all of this data will be derived from the courses you mentioned being taught in SL?

Yasmar Arida: Yes - Having identified learning models in on-line immersive social worlds we ask how and indeed, if these models translate into effective teaching 'in-world'.

JeffreyC Nightfire: That sounds like very valuable research.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Do you see a future for SL in education?

JeffreyC Nightfire: Or some form of a virtual world?

Yasmar Arida: It should be - I definitely see a future here at Deakin - we will need to keep fighting but there are a number of universities that we are connecting to and also ones overseas and the SLed community is amazingly supportive and collaborative.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Ahah.

Yasmar Arida: I think it can only build and hope that Linden see the value.

Yasmar Arida: We recently had University of New England come to our Island and they loved it.

JeffreyC Nightfire: What role do you think Linden Lab will, or could play in making SL useful for educators?

JeffreyC Nightfire: It sounds like one thing SL is doing is opening the door for some interesting collaborations across time and space among various institutions.
[15:11] Yasmar Arida: I have also invited my cousin -who is studying her masters in Architechture come into the island and she is going to approach her tutor to have it as a spce for showing flythroughs of their designs

[15:12] Yasmar Arida: i can see collaboration between architechture and designing teaching and learning spaces

[15:13] JeffreyC Nightfire: Are there things you think Linden Lab can do to support the educational exploration?

[15:15] Yasmar Arida: I think they are doing quite well. It would be nice for them to be up-to date with the sorts of things that are going on and then to hold tutorials that are specific to education. having said that the SLed is great. The most important thing i guess for us would be subsidising educative endeavours but i guess Linden may have not been exempt from the credit crunch


[15:16] JeffreyC Nightfire: I won't take up too much more of your time. I did want to ask if your students indicated any complaints about using SL in their coursework?

[15:17] Yasmar Arida: In our country we need to have better broad band coverage and this was one complaint. It also did take time to learn the basics and get off the introductory island NMC was helpful here

[15:18] Yasmar Arida: So I guess the extra time they felt was involved was one negative and getting used to the 'world' took time


[15:20] Yasmar Arida: No - they actually give us an understanding, i believe, as to how these students might learn to become part of another learning environment at their new schools and teaching placements in the real world!


[15:21] JeffreyC Nightfire: Well, Fiona, is there anything I've missed or anything else you'd like to add?

[15:22] Yasmar Arida: We have some students who take up rural and regional teaching placements and they are also able to complete a placement overseas. i can see us developing a connection to the Teen grid and completeing a teachingacement in a virtual world!

[15:23] Yasmar Arida: No thanks for your time - and for including me in the research. Love t hear about the results and i will send you an email soon about access to the Deakin Asts Education island

[15:23] JeffreyC Nightfire: That sounds great. This is actually for a Web site that I'm doing for a class. It's a very basic introductory Web design class
JeffreyC Nightfire: So my Web site won't be anything terribly impressive

JeffreyC Nightfire: But hopefully the content will be valuable

JeffreyC Nightfire: You have certainly been a great help!

JeffreyC Nightfire: I can send you a link to my site once it is completed.

Yasmar Arida: Would love to be part of it!! I am working on a Flash intro to my Early childhood unit. If you have a chance have a look at www.abc.net.au/dustechoes This is similar to the site entry I am working on

JeffreyC Nightfire: My colleagues and I are also in the process of submitting our quantitative survey findings to a journal, and we are trying to find time to do a qualitative analysis of the free-text responses.

JeffreyC Nightfire: Great. Thanks so much!

Yasmar Arida: Ok Thank you! Bye Yasmar

JeffreyC Nightfire: Bye!