GCCAz: A Maricopa Community College in the Virtual World of Second Life
2008 Innovation of the Year Program Application
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Executive Summary:
GCCAz: A Maricopa Community College in the Virtual World of Second Life is Maricopa's first foray into the growing educational environment of simulations and virtual worlds which employ 3D graphics to create unique spaces for faculty, students and the campus to explore creativity and deliver innovative learning spaces and experiences.

Description:
GCCAz: A Maricopa Community College in the Virtual World of Second Life is Maricopa's first foray into the growing educational environment of simulations and virtual worlds. These online worlds employ three-dimensional graphics to create immersive environments that mimic our traditional campus environment and take it into the 21st century. Driven by wider use of video game technology in the home, these applications shift the focus from entertainment to education and training. Educators can leverage their students' familiarity with these gaming platforms to provide cost-effective, safe learning environments for their students. Although these worlds can be delivered in a variety of formats, they all offer the student an opportunity to interact on a level that approximates, or even exceeds, the real world. Once immersed, the student can explore, collaborate and experiment with different outcomes and situations. A variety of simulated scenarios can be created, modified and delivered within this digital environment that facilitate assessment and improve student motivation, especially for distance education participants. New evidence is pointing to the effectiveness of these communities in distance-learning environments or course management systems which currently lack a bodily presence. Online students engage more when they have a presence in a class and ultimately complete more classes. They also tend to share more and feel able to talk about difficult subjects when protected by a certain sense of anonymity. Finally, virtual worlds also provide a rich set of tools for communication between people all over the valley or the world and the delivery of media-rich content to their users.

GCCAz finds its home in the virtual world of Second Life, a free software program that runs on Windows and Apple computers connected to the Internet. The client software renders the 3D information that it receives from the Internet and displays it on the user's computer monitor. Inside the virtual world, users pick an avatar, or character, which they then use to walk, run or fly through the various simulations which are created almost entirely by those same avatars and the humans that manipulate them. Avatars communicate with text chat or voice conferencing. Second Life allows for the importation of a variety of media types including sound, digital pictures and video. Where Second Life goes beyond the typical classroom is in its use of 3D technology. The realistic renderings of objects and the immersive audio and visual effects transport users into a world that can be remarkably familiar or very different.

GCCAz's educational endeavor in Second Life began last March after James Abraham approached Jim Dougherty about buying an island (in Second Life) to host his MCLI Learning Grant to build an interactive house for his Spanish classes and create a virtual campus for GCC. Jim purchased the island and the work began. A small group of interested faculty, including Jim and James, Nanci Burk and Karen Schwalm were joined by Jim Hamilton and started to brainstorm the educational uses of the space. The group decided to

create parcels dedicated to specific purposes: student use, faculty use, campus use, grant use. Each faculty member began developing their space with specific teaching objectives in mind. Nanci created a house to serve as a comfortable, relaxing place to meet her students and discuss issues related to communication. Karen, working with Jim H., made Mariposa Oh's Writing Pen, a space where she could meet with her online students and work with them on their English papers and find resources related to the course. Jim D. placed his house underwater to underscore the creative potential of this technology. The group then moved onto the campus space. Presently, the campus space houses a virtual enrollment center, a student union complete with café, panoramic photographs of the campus, marketing materials, GCC's promotional video and meeting spaces. Finally, a process was developed for the allocation of land to students. Interested students may submit a request for land to the email discussion group that we have established stating their intended plans for the space and demonstrating a clear picture of what they wish to accomplish. In addition, a sandbox was created above the island where students and faculty can experiment with building and explore the uses of Second Life within their own discipline.

Perhaps the most important thing about GCCAz is the way that it is being used. At the beginning of the fall '07 semester, GCCAz hosted a grand opening party for GCC students and educators from colleges and universities nationwide. The party included tours of the island, dancing, fireworks and lively conversation. It was attended virtually by nearly 70 avatars (or individuals) and by about 10 in-person in a classroom.   Next, GCCAz hosted a meeting of the New Media Consortium's Teacher's Buzz, a group of educators from across the country. The event was well attended and demonstrated GCCAz's role as a national model for educational uses of Second Life. It was also an opportunity to unveil the Second Life Reporting System, a diagnostic tool developed in the Office of TRI by Ling to track the traffic on an island and report on usage. This data bolsters the argument that this project is valuable. To date, this tool has tracked over 650 unique visitors and thousands of hours of contact on GCCAz.

Nanci Burk is utilizing the campus island for classes for the second semester this spring. In Fall 07, Nanci piloted a section of interpersonal communication students in Second Life. She tested pedagogical strategies for working with students in a virtual environment. For spring 2008, two sections of online interpersonal communication students have joined Nanci in Second Life for virtually face-to-face class discussions. Students apply communication concepts in intercultural locations in Second Life and meet at the GCCAz location for group discussions to ameliorate understanding. In the fall of 2008, Interpersonal Communication and Spanish courses specifically dedicated to Second Life will be offered by Nanci Burk and James Abraham.

We feel that GCCAz links with Maricopa Values in many ways:

1. Quality – GCCAz has the ability to create realistic simulations and authentic assessments and provide unique learning experiences for online students in an international online community to increase students' first-hand awareness of and interactions with persons of various cultures. The ability to transport foreign language students virtually to places like Chichen Itza or the Alhambra greatly increases their understanding of the target culture. The ability to interact with native speakers in native simulations offers them opportunities that do not exist in a traditional classroom.

2. Efficiency – GCCAz saves classroom space and transportation /parking/classroom issues by creating a new learning space that could be used as a virtual meeting tool district-wide. Instead of costly travel to foreign lands, students can visit virtually and develop the same skills. Instead of organizing a student group meeting at a place that requires commuting, students could log in from home and meet virtually to accomplish their group tasks.

3. Cost Effectiveness - This software is free and publicly available and the island is hosted by Linden Labs so it requires no hardware from the colleges to maintain. The international educational community contributes a considerable amount of free tutorials and learning aids for students and faculty members interested in creating immersive environments. In addition, many users offer their learning objects free of charge to educators.

4. Replication - This virtual environment and teaching strategies can easily be replicated at any MCCD college. In fact, Rio Salado has purchased an island and PC has leased land.

5. Creativity – GCCAz is a model of the creative potential of virtual worlds for education. It's use of space for faculty and student projects, campus business, marketing and virtual meetings is unique in the district and country. The unique approach to teaching communication and foreign language models the creation of an entirely new learning space for any discipline.

6. Timeliness – Since its inception in April of 2007, GCCAz has moved forward and taken on new challenges. At present, the space is being used by students on a daily basis. Innovative uses of this space are still to be developed. GCCAz is poised to ready for the inevitable explosion of 3D environmental learning in the future.

7. Learning - We have created an interest group devoted to Second Life and Maricopa called MCCD Educators to mentor and share with those faculty, staff and administration interested in helping develop this technology for students. James and Nanci also facilitate MCLI Learnshops district-wide directed at the educational uses of SL. GCCAz has hosted several local and national meetings to share its potential with other educators. GCCAz takes learning beyond the course content, giving students a vision of alternative learning environments on the Internet of the future.

8. Collaboration – GCCAz has been a collaborative effort from the start. We continue to collaborate on campus and across the district by offering space for experimenting to anyone in MCCD. We maintain an active list of those in MCCD with avatars in order to share resources and information about Second Life. We have shared the Second Life Reporting System nationally with the educational community in Second Life, establishing MCCD as a national leader in educating in online immersive environments.

    In conclusion, this award would help to educate others in MCCD about the incredible educational potential of immersive environments and provide additional space for the creativeness of MCCD.