

Virtual Worlds Overview

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Virtual Worlds Overview – video transcript



The video of Debbie McCormick's presentation can be viewed at:

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Introduction: Virtual Worlds

The convergence of open source content creation tools, gaming technology and the evolution of text-based Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVes) has facilitated the evolution of the genre now commonly referred to as ‘virtual worlds’. Today these ‘worlds’ feature rich, realistic graphical environments where participants interact, and sometimes create, fantasy realms that attract participants of various ages, cultures and genders.

The ‘opening up’ of the Internet in 1995 with the introduction of the World Wide Web, coupled with technology that now affords users varying degrees of control over the content and context of their experience has resulted in an explosion of activity in the creation and use of virtual worlds. Some virtual worlds launched in the 1990s including, Habbo Hotel (www.habbo.com), Whyville (www.whyville.net), and Activeworlds (www.activeworlds.com) are still active today along with a slew of newcomers.

Evidence suggests virtual worlds have reached or are approaching critical mass. Virtual worlds are now being developed to target participant demographics including gender (www.barbie.com), age (www.toontown.com), or interests (www.vmtv.com).

The rapid growth in the number of virtual worlds currently in operation makes it difficult to obtain an accurate number, but best estimates by Virtual Worlds News.com (<http://tinyurl.com/24ocxg>) put the figure at approximately eighty with a number of others in development and scheduled to launch this year (www.virtualworldsnews.com).

In 2007, research and advisory company Gartner Inc., predicted that “80 Percent of active Internet users will have a ‘second life’ in the virtual world by end of 2011” (Petthey, 2007) but not necessarily in Second Life.

Second Life

Chances are that if you’ve heard of a virtual world it is likely to be Second Life. With more than fourteen million registered users at the beginning of July 2008, Second Life has the highest number of adult (over twenty years-old) participants (KZero, 2008). There are three major drawbacks for educators and researchers who choose Second Life as their ‘virtual world of choice’ are:

- The ability to create their own content
- Highly customisable avatars
- Peer support approximately 5,000 educators and researchers subscribe to the Second Life

Educators Email list – 951 messages in June 2008)

- However I believe that teaching and learning in a virtual environment is highly immersive and that it provides educators with opportunities to ‘step outside the square’. The environmental affordances of Second Life are particularly suited to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Constructivism in a virtual world can mean both the construction of knowledge and meaning and the literal construction of learning artefacts. There are hundreds of examples of educational facilities and activities in Second Life and obviously we won’t have time to look at them all today so I have chosen some that I think are particularly good examples of how educators have used the environmental affordances to facilitate the Higher Order Thinking skills described in Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Please forgive any glaring pedagogical errors as I am an early career researcher and not a teacher. I have tried to include activities from a range of disciplines so I hope there is something in here that inspires you.

Activities

Monash University Chinese Studies Centre (Language and Culture)

The Chinese Studies Centre in Second Life is the brainchild of Scott Grant from Monash University’s School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics. Scott teaches Chinese language and Media Studies, the Introduction to Translation Studies and he is the coordinator of the Chinese Incountry Program in Shanghai.

Scott has collaborated with a variety of talented builders and scripters in Second Life to make his vision a reality. The centre is a mixture of old and new elements and it’s a wonderful space for a variety of cultural and educational activities.

The Teahouse is a great example of a layered learning approach that builds skills as students progress through a number of learning activities and then get to try their new skills in simulated real-life scenario of ordering a meal at a restaurant.

Pharmatopia (Pharmacy)

The Monash University -Victorian College of Pharmacy build, Pharmatopia, is a great example of an interactive environment where students can get a hands-on feel for what happens in the manufacture of tablets. The attention to detail is extraordinary.

Genome Island (Biology)

Genome Island was designed by a real-life biology professor at Texas Wesleyan

University as a way to teach undergraduate genetics. The sim has grown to be one of the most visited in Second Life and is a terrific example of using the environmental affordances to construct learning activities that are both immersive and interactive.

Starry Night – (Art and Literature)

This build allows students to examine the nuances of the fabulous Van Gogh painting Starry Night and it's simply beautiful.

Harvard –

The Harvard Law School Berkman Centre was one of the first education institutions to offer a course in this novel environment and as such they generated a lot of publicity at the time. The course, 'Law in the Court of Public Opinion' was first conducted in 2006.

Enrolment in the Harvard Extension School was open to the public. Extension students will experience portions of the class through a virtual world, known as Second Life. Videos, discussions, lectures, and office hours will all take place on Berkman Island. Students from anywhere in the world will be able to interact with one another, in real time.

Tools

Second Life comes readymade with a variety of useful tools that are useful for teachers and researchers. This example shows Seeker and a colleague using the Second Life Notecard system to use of data from another avatar.

The climate of cooperation and collaboration extends beyond the teacher and researchers email list. There are many talented people develop and sell (or sometimes give away) tools that facilitate learning, teaching and assessment.

Sloodle – integrates Second Life and the Moodle learning-management system.

Although the environment presents a multitude of opportunities for novel teaching and learning activities, I believe its real strength lies in its potential as a collaborative environment that provides a much stronger feeling of presence than a traditional chat room or discussion group.

The Future

One of the greatest issues for educational institutions is internet security. This is being addressed by a number of organisations who are developing virtual worlds that can 'live' on the institutions server with 'doors' to the outside world if required.

The use of avatars on the web isn't ubiquitous but it is growing which can be evidenced by these few examples

- Weblins
- Facebook

Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed this very brief tour today, I know I will be seeing some of you in Second Life later today and I look forward to seeing others in the future. If you would like more information please visit my wiki – www.seekersbrain.wikispaces.com

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