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ABSTRACT

Frequently, research on management education does not take into account the role of Information Technology as a key resource to support teaching and learning processes. In this article, the authors explore the current applications of Three Dimensional Virtual Worlds (3DVW) for Management education. The authors researched the educational institutions subscribed to Second Life (SL) (http://secondlife.com/), as it is one of the most popular open 3DVW available worldwide. The results reveal that only 31% of the institutions that answered the authors’ questionnaire actually use SL in Management education. Regarding the acceptance of SL in Management education, one third of the 15 institutions using it claim that it has been well received and accepted both by students and lecturers/professors. These results lead to several questions for further research and development of practices concerning the use of 3DVW for Management education.

Keywords: Information Technology, Management Education, Second Life (SL), Three Dimensional Virtual Worlds (3DVW), Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

As some previous studies highlight, Information Technology (IT), although pervasive in our daily lives as well as in the organizational life, is frequently not taken carefully into account in organizational research (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Zammuto et al., 2007). Similarly, IT use in management education is frequently...
overlooked, especially recent (and sometimes, polemical) technologies such as the Metaverses.

Metaverses are technologies that allow the creation of Three Dimensional Virtual Worlds (3DVW) such as Active Worlds, Second Life (SL) and more recently, free software platforms such as Open Simulator and Open Wonderland among others have been used for educational and professional training purposes.

The Gartner Group Hype Cycle Report (2011) points out that Virtual Worlds are now in the “trough of disillusionment”, after the hype surrounding them in 2007; however, it is predicted that this technology will achieve mainstream adoption five to ten years from now. Several forecast reports predict that the future lies in the 3D Internet, “pioneered through virtual environments such as “Second Life”” (European Commission, 2008, p. 3). This can be attributed to an increasing maturity and convergence in broadband, wireless computing, video and audio technologies, and the creation of conditions for building a more practical and usable virtual social arena, not based solely on text but also on richer media (Messinger et al., 2009).

Thanks to their great potential, 3DVW have gained legitimacy in business and educational settings for their use in activities such as multimedia meetings and training, virtual teamwork, distributed collaboration and real-time simulation (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010). They also provide an interesting environment for innovation and experimentation among educators, scientists and software teams (Bainbridge 2007, Schultze et al., 2008).

Dickey (2003) and (2005) found that a Virtual World can support a constructivist learning environment for geographically distant learners. Communication features such as the possibility of establishing a unique identity (through the use of an avatar) and several tools for conversation provide opportunities for collaborative and cooperative learning.

Girvan and Savage (2010) claim there are many institutions exploring the use of 3DVW for education, however it is necessary to consider which educational approaches can provide an opportunity to do more than recreate the traditional classroom in these virtual environments. It is important to make use of the unique characteristics and potential that this type of technology can offer.

Hew and Cheung (2010) reviewed a set of empirical research studies on the use of three dimensional virtual worlds in education. At the end of their analysis they found that virtual worlds may be used as: (1) communication spaces – for instance, to interact with others in order to learn a new language, (2) simulation of space (spatial) – for instance, to simulate being in a place such as an university campus and (3) experiential spaces – with richer experiences within the virtual world, for instance, to play, act or build 3D objects. Most of the studies reviewed by them were conducted in polytechnic and university settings, frequently carried out in the media arts and health and environment disciplines.

However, still little is known about how educational institutions worldwide, and business and management schools in particular are using this type of virtual environment, and what practices are adopted for teaching and learning using 3DVW.

The aim of this paper is to explore current applications of 3DVW in Management education (graduate and undergraduate courses, MBA, etc.). We have researched the educational institutions subscribed to Second Life (SL) (http://secondlife.com/), as this is one of the most popular open 3D Virtual Worlds available worldwide (Zhou et al., 2010). Many educational institutions have adopted SL as a platform for education and several organizations use SL to support distance learning (De Lucia et al., 2009).

Publicly launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, SL is a massive user 3DVW, in which avatars controlled by users can interact with each other as well as objects and scripts, have fun, buy virtual land (islands or regions) and use it for their own purposes such as constructing libraries, museums, universities or classrooms (Aydogan et al., 2011). This 3DVW offers several tools such as text chat, forums, VoIP