

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Stewart Martin, Centre for Educational Studies, University of Hull, Hull, UK

Virtual worlds now incorporate a wide range of features that permit a rich and immersive multi-modal experience that enables an increasingly strong sense of ‘presence.’ This has implications for enriching experiences online and for blurring distinctions between the physical and virtual worlds in the same way as is common in other imaginative constructs such as the arts, particularly literature and drama, including film. Just as in these other technologies, the propensity of humankind to engage in the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ renders such imaginative created experiences deeply engaging and believable, if at times destabilising or unnerving. And just as is also the case with these other technologies, the ‘believability’ and personal relevance of these experiences makes them powerful vehicles for learning and reflection. In this sense virtual experiences have always been ‘real’ to the user and the distinction between the virtual and the physical world is now being recognised as increasingly unhelpful in understanding how individuals use their imagination and inner-life to relate to and in many ways actually create their lived experience. The social spaces in which we articulate our many identities or pursue our learning are, by definition, manufactured realities within which artefacts of many kinds may be created, placed or used to communicate with, relate to and learn from other consciousnesses we meet, whether these spaces and entities are virtual,

physical or imaginative. Our aim as educators and innovators in such spaces is to encourage the recruitment of what at first may seem like incompatible ideas from unfamiliar sources and contexts to develop a more creative, student-centred, learning context.

In this special issue on the use of virtual and personal learning environments in education, this theme of moving from virtual implementations to real outcomes is picked up and explored in several ways: Kongmee, Strachan, Pickard, and Montgomery’s paper looks at the use of online communities and virtual environments in Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games as learning and teaching tools for students learning a second language. Set in Thailand, this study uses an interesting mixed-methods approach of action research and ethnography to study second (English) language acquisition by students where traditional educational provision is finding it difficult to perform well. Traditional second-language teaching lacks ‘live’ opportunities and features many artificial language examples and in this regard Thailand is not dissimilar to many other countries seeking to promote multi-lingual citizens. Virtual worlds can provide active learning opportunities in persuasively authentic settings that encourage personal interpretation, meaning making and critical reflection. These features were exploited in an in-depth study of the experiences of two students who engaged with a number of worlds

featuring foreign players who were native speakers of English. The students' experiences in these experiments were highly positive and motivating and showed high potential for transference of learning from the virtual to the physical world. In common with other papers included here, this study underlines the value of virtual worlds for creating authentic learning spaces that promote strong personal identification and sustained engagement in learners.

In contrast to exploring the formal role of students, Jacka and Booth, in their paper on 'Pre-Service Teachers Designing Virtual World Learning Environments,' describes the use of virtual worlds as valuable technologies for providing pre-practitioner learning experiences for pre-service teachers. The virtual spaces these technologies provide offer genuine 'pre-experience' for experimentation and modelling that create deeper and richer learning than traditional training-only provision. These technologies encourage active student-centred learning for both trainee and established professionals in teaching and encourage creativity, the development of new learning opportunities and a refreshing 'practice what you preach' approach to ICT use in educational contexts that has wider implications for other professions also. The reflections of one pre-service student teacher who experienced the created immersive space of 'Interaction Island' are used in this paper to explore what it is that makes virtual worlds such unique and potentially rich spaces for learning and teaching. Again the key issues are those surrounding the ability of virtual worlds to offer the articulation of a complex and convincing identity and the sense of (co)presence that seem to be such central prerequisites for engagement, collaboration and the development of a constructivist pedagogy. Virtual spaces as locations for learning-by-doing created a deep experience for the student in this study that were valuable in developing her own understanding of the constructivist learning process.

An important element in all learning is its psychological context. Onibokun and van Schaik, in 'Using a Classification of Psychological Experience in Social-Networking Sites

as a Virtual Learning Environment,' report a study of the relatively little explored overlap between social networking and virtual environments and use a 'think aloud' methodology to identify six fundamental psychological needs that are important in social networking in a sample of university students. They argue that these psychological needs, and their fulfilment to varying degrees, help explain the persistent appeal of social networking technologies. As one example of this, Facebook is cited as it provides interesting insights into what makes some technologies more 'sticky' than others, where individuals will often spend significant time creating, developing and communicating - whereas other technologies which would seem to offer a richer and more multi-modal experience (such as visually rich virtual environments) have at times garnered less of a following. Higher Education institutions worldwide are increasingly aware of the importance of offering students a satisfying educational experience, especially in light of economic pressures and increased competition for students. There are also demands for a more student-centred pedagogy and virtual environments would seem to offer enticing possibilities for more personalised learning. The seven key categories of interaction experience found in student use of Facebook (communication, gratification, inquisitiveness, evocation, interconnection, apprehension and ambience) were found to be conceptually similar to the psychological needs of relatedness-belongingness, pleasure-stimulation, influence-popularity, security-control, competence-effectance and self-actualising-meaning. These features of learner experience are little developed or used at present in the virtual world technologies found in Higher Education institutions. Understanding and using these interaction experiences and psychological needs to develop educational tools and experiences in virtual worlds is likely to be an important key to ensuring that both the virtual and physical educational experiences of students will in future be both 'sticky' and effective.

In common with other papers in this special issue, Hakak, Bilorja, and Rahimi focus

on the powerful ability of 3D virtual spaces to break conventional stereotypical thinking and encourage a more creative approach to problem solving. The potential of virtual worlds to encourage highly creative expression, to facilitate lateral thinking and the development of new ideas is the focus of their paper, where they discuss the contribution of virtual environments to the education of architects. Within this they identify the key to fostering greater creativity as the willingness to be open to new experiences, to diversity and to novel experience – all opportunities that virtual environments are able to provide in abundance. In particular, the focus here is on a virtual space freed of the constraints of conventional technology, traditional materials and the limitations of the known. Architecture is, in this sense, then able to experiment with non-realistic forms and become “polemical, critical and experimental.” These too are the aims of many educators seeking to move beyond a traditional instructivist pedagogy and encourage their students to imagine and experience alternative realities that may challenge traditional stereotypes and offer new experience and new ways of thinking and understanding – they too are seeking to encourage their students to find and use new “behavioural and cognitive scripts.”

Martin’s paper also draws on the ability of virtual worlds and personal learning environments to afford new and potentially unnerving experiences with others and ourselves, whether

we are occupying the role of learner or teacher. Increasingly in virtual environments we find ourselves to be both. The potential of immersive and virtual spaces to help us explore who we are, who we wish to be and who we may become is relevant not just to young people as they grow into adult roles in society but also to anyone seeking to extend their understanding of ‘otherness’ in the virtual or the physical world. Virtual worlds are being used to explore our growing psychological understanding of the needs and interactions within human experience and the Citizenship Project is one example of how we might use them for serious social purposes and also to create a more interactive educational experience within learning and teaching contexts. Like several other papers in this special issue ‘Exploring identity and citizenship in a virtual world’ argues for the need to value more the importance of reflection and experimentation in learning. Identity and citizenship exploration exemplify the value of the ‘almost-live’ experience available within immersive virtual environments and take advantage of our propensity to seek out and enjoy such experiences by exploiting the permeability between the imaginative, the virtual and the physical worlds.

Stewart Martin
Guest Editor
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Stewart Martin is Head of Department at the Centre for Educational Studies in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Hull, UK. His research is funded by the European Commission, the UK Teacher Development Agency, the Higher Education Funding Council, the British Council (Digital Economy) and the EPSRC. His research interests include the educational application of digital technology, citizenship and images of the self, educational leadership and organisational change. He is currently Chair of the International Virtual Environments Research Group (iVERG) <http://www.iverg.com>, a member of the international editorial board for Educational Research and Evaluation and Project Leader for the EPSRC project 'What Citizenship do we want?'