Chapter XIII
Virtual Worlds as Environment for Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the potential of three dimensional virtual worlds as venue for constructivist learning communities. To reach a balanced answer to the question whether virtual worlds are likely to evolve into satisfying educational instruments (1) we retrace the historic trajectory of virtual world development and computer based learning, second we describe how (2) learning communities function in general and how virtual worlds in particular can be exploited for collective educational experiences. With this basis, we then present (3) a structured analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) found to bound the potential of SecondLife for institutionalized learning based on our expertise from working and teaching in virtual worlds. In conclusion we argue that a critical but optimistic approach towards virtual learning environments (and SecondLife in particular) is adequate. In our assessment virtual worlds bear great opportunities for educational purposes, however most of today’s educational institutions will be challenged to encompass the informal and holistic learning scenario.

INTRODUCTION

As it is the intention of this chapter to delve on the constructivist knowledge networking paradigm, the authors believe that it is more appropriate to develop an optimistic scenario while aware of this biased perception than restraining the description and analysis to what is feasible today.

In his paper on the future of education Lombardo argues for educational approaches that allow
for a more holistic understanding of knowledge (as in wisdom): “Where in the past emphasis was on memorization, drill, and mechanical learning, education today should facilitate the development of interpretative skills and deep understanding” (Lombardo, 2007). Far from being a reality in 2007, virtual worlds are assessed to be suitable complements to presential education and apprenticeship training because they “facilitating collaborations, community and experiential learning” (Dickey 2005).

ICT IN EDUCATION: FROM TECHNOLOGY TO COMMUNITY

Over the years, the use of ICT in education has shifted its focus from a perspective that attempted to use software and hardware as means of knowledge transmission (the Computer Based Training or Computer Based Learning approach), to a perspective where ICT is deployed to provide an improved environment for creative knowledge construction (Computer Enhanced Learning). Today’s e-learning paradigm no longer regards the web as only a pipe to deliver content, but also as a meeting point, a place to ‘be’ with others, where all sort of communities are conjugated (as communities of practice, or communities of interest). In the radical constructivist approach promoted, all experiences serve as basis for reality construction and thus all places are learning environments. It depends on the environments architect to create the atmosphere for discourse and inquiry and to provide the tools to empower the constituents to effectively communicate, take decisions, and own their creations.

JUST A GAME

3D games have been around at least since Wolfenstein 3D (1986) precursor of the famous Doom. But, despite the technical evolutions, first person “shoot em up” games have almost exclusively captured the attention of young male gamers. Learning communities are not about 3D and rendering quality.

After the boom of PAC-MAN and Space Invaders (which rendered Japan in a sudden shortage of coins) it is hard to find games that captured such a wide social spectrum of players. We need to look for games like “SimCity” or “The Sims”, specially to capture female audiences. These games are more about “what can I create with this game?” than “what is the experience that this game will deliver?” The latter seems to be more what young males are interested in.

SimCity and The Sims are about creating things. They came in a time when thousands of newbie computer users needed to learn how to interact with technology to access information and build knowledge objects. Constructivism reminds us how creating is a good way of learning.

The online gaming, brings the next big hit in gaming comes with the MMORPG where the social elements comes into the equation. While shoot em up players use the network to kill each other in online 3D environments, the players of MMORPG such as Everquest, WoW, Guild Wars, Hellgate London, and others.

The communities transcend the virtual space of the 3DVE when the members meet in conventions, form guilds or clans, and start to collaborate, trade (even with real money) and interact in the “real world”.

The current generation of videogames has established genres that use narrative, competitive strategies and game structures built around community-based interaction. In this environment, not few players have made good friends or with people they got to know inside the game.

“We are on the cusp of a new generation where parents telling their children about the circumstances of how they met will not revolve around