Chapter 6
Unpacking Strong vs. Weak Presence in Second Life Enactive Role Play

Caroline M. L. Ho
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on investigating participants’ presence in Second Life among students in enactive role play. The interest in the study is on the nature of participant interaction and construction of discourse moves which reflect the nature and extent of their presence (identified as ‘strong’ or ‘weak’) in the virtual world. The chapter examines the key concept of presence and its association with related concepts of engagement and identity against the sociocultural approach to learning and functional linguistic theory which provide the theoretical underpinnings and frame the research focus of this study. A review of related studies in the field follows after which background information on the context of the study is provided. The method of analysis is explained after which an analysis and a discussion of findings are presented. The chapter closes with highlighting the pertinent pedagogical implications of virtual enactive role play in 3D immersive spaces for learning.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual world environments are increasingly recognized as dynamic platforms for collaborative, participatory learning and co-construction of knowledge in various contexts for different purposes (Antonacci & Modress, 2008; Lee, 2009; Warburton, 2007). They provide new opportunities to enrich the educational experience through media-rich immersive learning (New Media Consortium, 2009; Wagner, 2008). Three-dimensional (3D) immersive spaces in virtual worlds actively engage participants in multi-party, interactive, digital simulations through digital personas or avatars created in a variety of ways—visually, aurally and interactively (Cruz-Neira, 1998). Interaction in immersive virtual environments has expanded the scope of what participants do in the real, physical world as participants have been noted to identify more strongly with avatars.
through learning to think, speak and act in role (Shaffer, 2006). Further, in directly being involved in actively creating content through their virtual experiences, this is acknowledged to facilitate social interactions closely related to those in reality (Gee, 2003). Ultimately, the vicarious experience arising from real-time interaction in immersive learning spaces enables participants to better relate to complex issues which may be better dealt with than in reality (Shaffer, 2007). The growing interest shared among educators today in exploring the potential of virtual environments for supporting and enhancing teaching and learning (Good & Thackray, 2008; White, 2008) is not surprising. There are now around 5,000 educators who are active in virtual worlds, accounting for more than 300 institutions worldwide (Tamsyn, 2009).

The chapter draws on a larger research study (Ho, Rappa, Chee, 2009) of the Second Life (SL) immersive learning environment in the context of the subject General Paper (GP) offered at the pre-university level (Grade 12) in Singapore which emphasizes argumentation and critical thinking. The interest in the design experiment (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992) is in providing students a creative opportunity to develop skills in purposeful dialogic interaction through enactive role play (Bruner, 1968, 1966; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991) where they learn to critically think, construct arguments, and exchange viewpoints and perspectives in the process of virtual dialoguing with other participants.

Enactive role play in virtual worlds where participants assume and act out specific roles in various situations is acknowledged to enable students to acquire collective intelligence, skills of problem-solving, strategic thinking, interpreting contexts and imaginative play (Gee, 2004; Shaffer, 2007). This act of ‘knowing by doing’ (Bruner, 1968) emphasizes that ‘embodied sensory and motor processes, perception and action are fundamentally inseparable in lived cognition’ (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991, p. 172-173).

The advantages afforded by the multimodality in the 3D virtual space (Beach, Anson, Breuch, & Swiss, 2008; Beach & Doerr-Stevens, in press) facilitate a dynamic form of interactivity where students can visually identify and respond to other participants, and acquire collaborative argumentation skills (Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2009). This underscores a sociocultural approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1986) which emphasizes that higher order functions and learning are embedded in active and engaged participant interaction.

Investigating the emerging technologies and trends through communication and interaction in virtual immersive environments and 3D learning spaces is an overarching theme in this volume. With this interest in view, this chapter specifically seeks to account for how participant presence is realized linguistically to varying degrees, and to identify specific discourse strategies adopted against the heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) backdrop of voices of the ‘other’ within a specific immersive virtual learning environment. Attention is given to specific linguistic resources and strategies used by participants in their enactments to engage meaningfully with each other within the interactive, 3D, multi-party context of the virtual exchange.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Presence

The concept of presence carries different interpretations for various individuals in fulfilling diverse purposes in a range of contexts. It has been acknowledged that there are no formal definitions on presence (Stanney et al., 1998) due to a lack of established and effective indicators to measure presence in the virtual world environments (Sadowski & Stanney, 2002). However, as a concept central to virtual worlds and immersive environments, it has a significant place in representing an individual’s online behaviour in relation to other participants and to specific situations cre-