Chapter 7
Verbal and Non–Verbal Communication in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, several studies concerning the advantages and potentialities of using Second Life in education came to spotlight. To identify which type of communication is most common among avatars and to understand if there is any similarity with communication in real life, a case study was developed in order to analyze both verbal and non-verbal communication among Master degree students.

This chapter will explain how this study was conducted, as well as the results and the conclusions drawn from it. After the data analysis we concluded that avatars rarely use kinesic communication - although there is, in Second Life, an inventory full of gestures - using instead verbal communication. In fact, it was very clear that individuals use written code to express their emotions, thus increasing the number of participations. Non-verbal communication had a small role in interaction, proxemics was influenced by space, and finally, appearance didn’t reveal the true personality of the user.

INTRODUCTION

Second Life (SL) is known by its potential to enhance social communication, interaction and information sharing. This virtual environment is also interactive and dynamic, allowing users to experience situations beyond one’s physical and financial constraints (Appel, 2006, p.4). In fact, several teachers, doctors, architects, businessmen and many others use SL to develop their daily activities, because it is a realistic and persistent environment, and because it expresses a sense of presence and a sense of immersion. SL also has several advantages for educational professionals, especially regarding content creation, role-playing and socialization.

However, in order to use virtual worlds in classrooms, it is fundamental to understand how individuals relate with each other and what pedagogical strategies are more efficient in those
environments. To fulfill these goals, the present research was carried forward, over the period of a year, aiming to understand the verbal and non-verbal behavior of several Portuguese master students in Second Life.

Words have an enormous importance in our lives because they can express feelings, enlighten, excite. Therefore language can be a great instrument or a hazardous weapon. (Toomey, 2000).

But communication doesn’t necessarily mean speaking: pre-historical men used gestures, postures and movements to get in touch with other individuals. Davis (1979) however acknowledges the value of words, adding that words are beautiful, exciting, and important, although also expressing a belief that words have been over-estimated since they represent neither the full nor the partial communicated message. Indeed, verbal communication cannot be analyzed without non-verbal communication, because doing so might jeopardize the effectiveness of the whole purpose of interaction. To fully understand the meaning of verbal messages, individuals have to take into account intonation, intention, environment, interaction, interlocutor and non-verbal communication (Streeck, 1993, in Leathers, 1997). As Kendon (1972) stated “the flow of movement in the listener may be rhythmically coordinated with the speech and movements of the speaker.” (in Weitz, 1979, p. 89)

Non-verbal communication is responsible, in real life, for 65 to 70 percent of human interaction (Birdwhistell, 1970, in Leathers, 1997). The way we look, the way we place ourselves and the gestures we make are very expressive and say a lot about/of our emotions. These items are studied by several disciplines, namely proxemics and kinesics. Obviously, non-verbal communication is quite different in SL and in real life, but there are some points in common.

Since we have described the two major concepts that underlie our study it is now important to present its main aims which were to identify how individuals relate with each other in SL and to identify whether there is any similarity with real life interaction, so as to adjust SL classroom strategies to both the teachers’ and the students’ needs. Furthermore, we also wanted to:

1. Understand the interaction typologies—verbal and non-verbal communication—among students in Second Life and their relevance to education;
2. Understand the impact of interaction between individuals concerning the increase of sense of community;
3. Identify the advantages of interacting in virtual worlds when compared with the advantages of traditional communication means.

COMMUNICATION TYPOLOGIES

Verbal Communication

Language is a tool to accomplish one’s goals and success (Ng e Bradac, in Szuchewycz, 1995), because it can develop, modify or overthrow the power someone has. Although it is very important, language is not the only constituent of the communicative process, since the non-verbal acts, such as movements, postures and facial expressions, also express feelings and emotions.

Although it might look simple, the analysis of verbal communication requires the consideration of multiple variables. Since language is full of ambiguities it is necessary to use complementary signs to get the message through (Toomey, 2000). Verbal messages can be used to fulfill four main functions:

1. Give information on people’s attitude;
2. Provide personal information about the speaker and his state of mind;
3. Report the intensity of speaker’s emotions;
4. Present relational information.
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