Chapter 2

Transmedia Communication: The Virtual Classroom Experience

Sharon Stoerger
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds have the potential to foster new forms of educational communication among students and their instructors. These digital exchanges in virtual worlds are facilitated by computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as text-based media and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). This chapter will investigate the media that were used to support student-instructor interactions in three continuing education courses situated in Second Life (SL). Based on these observations, text chat was more effective than VoIP at supporting educational discussions during these class sessions.

INTRODUCTION

Three-dimensional virtual worlds are visually and textually rich spaces that have, since their inception, facilitated new forms of communication (New Media Consortium, 2007). Second Life (SL), for one, is a highly complex, multimodal environment that is made up of text, audio, and images. Unlike massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) that are set in virtual worlds, there is no pre-scripted back story that guides the SL activities. Registered users (i.e., residents) imagine and create the content for the virtual world. In SL, residents also have control over the appearance and exploration activities of their avatar, or digital character, which can be a powerful learning experience alone. As this suggests, being a resident in SL requires active participation.

Many technologies such as SL have flattened the world (Friedman, 2005) in ways that enable individuals from around the globe to come together virtually to interact and participate in shared experiences. These technologies allow users to take part in the creation and exchange of information in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-077-4.ch002
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dynamic ways (Dede, 2008). Moreover, the sense of “being there” is heightened when individuals actively participate and interact with others in the virtual world (i.e., in-world) (Merchant, 2009). Because SL is robust, educators can create a wide variety of in-world activities, including ones that may be difficult or impossible for students to experience in the physical world.

For example, instructors can situate the virtual classroom in a replica of 19th century England, and discuss Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* while dressed as Elizabeth Bennet. Instructors can also take students on a tour of Virtual Harlem to learn about Harlem, New York during the 1920s, or integrate sound into the environment to enhance an in-world dance performance by Ballet Pixelle. Some early adopters include programmers of innovative simulations such as the Virtual Stomach Museum where students can experience the look and feel of conditions such as ulcers and stomach cancer. SL is also a space where geographically dispersed individuals can virtually come together to participate in professional activities such as educational conferences and research initiatives. Because of the learning potential associated with SL, some scholars are predicting that all universities will have an in-world presence within 5 years (Salt, Atkins, & Blackall, 2008).

Text-based and VoIP options are available in many digital environments. Yet, the availability of specific communication options and the stability of these media vary from one virtual world to the next. Also, it is not uncommon for new modes of communication to be integrated into existing virtual worlds. In SL, for example, synchronous text chat and instant messaging (IM) were the initial options for in-world communication. VoIP, which is a common feature in many MMOGs, was introduced to the SL environment in 2007 (Lewis PR, 2009). To support in-world activities, synchronous and asynchronous out-of-world (that is, outside of the virtual world) options may be utilized. Discussion forums (e.g., Google Groups, Moodle), VoIP (e.g., Skype), microblogging technologies (e.g., Twitter), and email are a few examples of external tools used to supplement in-world interactions.

It is well-documented that SL has a steep learning curve (e.g., Fitzgibbon, Oldham, & Johnston, 2008; Luo & Kemp, 2008). In order for residents to thrive in SL, they must have a certain degree of skill, an understanding of the environment, and possession of virtual world related knowledge. The acquisition of expertise in SL requires socialization, learning through doing, and the development of domain knowledge. Further, the choice of communication media by individuals who frequent virtual worlds can be a complex process. The availability and the affordances of the technology impact these decisions and influence the use of these tools. The social norms of these spaces play a role in these choices, as well, and can change as new communication options become available to the in-world group. Yet, groups that express a preference for a particular communication mode may be reluctant to adopt a new one.

Merchant (2009) posits that virtual worlds foster new forms of communicative relationships among teachers and students. With the exception of Steinkuehler (2004), who examined the discourse among players in the MMOG, *Lineage*, there is scant research that investigates the characteristics of the in-world interactions (Mon, 2009). While much of the literature touts the benefits of virtual worlds, scholars such as Salmon (2009) stress that more experimentation and further examination of the pedagogical benefits of these digital environments is needed. This study examines the educational and social interactions that took place during three SL-based continuing education courses and the media used to facilitate this process. The findings illustrate the patterns that emerged from the SL course interactions, as well as the ways in which these patterns changed as students engaged in active learning tasks. In addition, the factors that impacted the computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools used by the students and the instructors will be described.