Chapter IX

Reflective Designing for Actors and Avatars in Virtual Worlds

Sisse Siggaard Jensen
Roskilde University, Denmark

Abstract

This chapter proposes a designing strategy referred to as “virtual 3D exploratories”. It is a strategy by which to facilitate knowledge sharing and social innovation, activities important to many postmodern organizations and work groups—be they educational or commercial. The strategy will allow us to build virtual worlds, and universes, aimed at exploration—virtual worlds, where actors interact and communicate with each other by the means of avatars. To substantiate the designing strategy, this chapter calls attention to virtual phenomena such as: avatar-based interaction, communication, and scenarios designed for reflective practices. Taking a first step, the chapter presents narratives and video-based self-observations from 12 experiential sessions undertaken by the “Virtual 3D Agora-world” SIG as part of the EQUEL EU research project (2002-2004). Based on findings and reflections from these sessions, the designing strategy of virtual “exploratories” is outlined with reference to the “sense-making” theory (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003) and summarized in a “designing triangle”.

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Introduction

This chapter proposes the development of virtual 3D “exploratories” to bring about virtual and creative activity-systems to complement the prevailing file sharing systems of computer-supported collaboration. Virtual activity-systems emphasize the importance of actually “doing” something together in concurrent action and interaction. Moreover, the notion of exploratories, or “virtual laboratories”, stands for a reflective designing strategy by which to support knowledge intensive and creative activity such as organizational knowledge sharing and social innovation. Some of the worlds and games of virtual universes, and particularly advanced multi-user online role-playing games, inspire this strategy of virtual exploratories. Being present in virtual worlds implies, among other things, that human interaction and communication is avatar-based. Avatars thus condition the development of exploratories, and they play an important part in the reflections of this chapter.

In virtual worlds, actors present themselves in the shape of an avatar. Choosing an avatar is the very basis for action. It is also a precondition for interaction. The avatars may take the shape of fictitious creations, such as human beings merged with creatures, dragons, mythological heroes and gods, mermaids, rats, demons, or atoms. They may also depict familiar roles such as craftsmen, businessmen, merchants, or stockbrokers but in an imaginative framing whether fantastic or dystopian. This chapter deals with questions of how it feels to act as an avatar and to interact with other avatars, and also, how by communicating as avatars conditions social interaction and knowledge sharing. As I see it, this is a matter of general interest, as advanced multi-user online role-playing games have become pervasive platforms for networked communication, especially among younger generations.

In this chapter, I do not presume to present a general theory about communicating as avatars in virtual worlds. I will, however, take a step towards understanding such virtual phenomena by presenting some of the findings from empirical research carried out in the project “The Virtual 3D Agora-world”. In this project, several questions were explored: Is it possible to enact complex processes of knowledge sharing and social innovation in a 3D virtual world based on interaction with avatars, building a meeting place consisting of only virtual 3D building objects? How does communicating with avatars influence social interaction and knowledge sharing? Is it possible for actors acting as avatars to collaborate as a team while actually building a virtual meeting place, a virtual agora? With such questions in mind, 12 explorative sessions have been undertaken to explore if the energy, fun, and eventful experiences of virtual worlds may also be utilized in support of reflective and creative activity.

Virtual worlds come from open-ended, innovative and fantastic, time and money consuming, online role-playing games. With these games, virtual experiences have
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