

## Choosing the best virtual world for your teaching needs

### Synopsis by Virtual World Watch

#### Background

In Europe and North America, virtual worlds such as Second Life are creeping into the educator's technology toolkit. While still in the minority, compared to tools such as virtual learning environments, virtual worlds have some traction after several years of fragmented use in universities and colleges.

How are virtual worlds used? What characteristics do they possess which give them the edge over other technologies in a learning situation? And what's the trade-off in terms of issues unique to their use?

#### Uses

- Virtual Worlds allow people to communicate and interact, without leaving the office or home. Meetings, tutorials, group work, seminars and other occasions requiring two or more people are possible if they have the requisite technology, skills and access to a shared virtual area. Video, audio and other digital media, such as live conference feeds, can be integrated. This is obviously a saver, in terms of time, money and CO2 emissions.
- Buildings, historical places, art, ephemera and structures either existing or not can be recreated, often cheaply.
- Virtual worlds are based around communication, and many offer a range of tools for doing that, such as instant messaging, forums and voice input. Recording tools are sometimes built in or available as add-ons, allowing sessions to be captured for later analysis.
- Virtual worlds can be used to recreate something very small, such as molecules and atoms, or very large, such as planets and stars. Programming allows various means of animation and user interaction. For example, virtual worlds have been used to animate how bacteria develop and the molecular structure of atoms.
- Simulating the real world is a popular educational use of virtual worlds. This enables situations which are unpredictable, costly or dangerous to be 'acted out' using avatars, recorded and analysed. In UK universities, virtual worlds have been used to simulate accidents in warehouses, treating victims of road accidents, dealing with fires in care

homes and (and this one is especially popular) midwives helping to give birth.

- Effective, guided use of virtual worlds helps to develop 'soft skills' such as teamwork, collaboration and communication amongst a group of learners. While these are not usually requirements of a curriculum, they are obviously beneficial to the learner in their studies and post-education work.
- The strong communication features of some virtual worlds make them attractive technologies for particular subject areas. Language learning is one where the combination of voice, text and video input has resulted in virtual worlds being used by various colleges.

## **Issues**

Whilst virtual worlds have many attractive properties, they come at a price, having many issues to be considered before embarking on their use. These include:

- Determining which virtual world is 'best' for your particular learning situation - and whether a virtual world is better than some other technology - which can be a time-consuming task.
- Whether the PCs or Macs used by the learner are of a high enough technical specification to run the virtual world.
- Whether the technical capabilities, and support, of the institution make it feasible to run sessions using virtual worlds.
- The costs of developing within the virtual world, which depend on factors such as the type of land, and whether existing structures and content are used or new ones created.
- The time involved for staff to familiarise themselves with the virtual world, plus the time learners take to orientate.
- Whether learners come into contact with, or are distracted by, other things going on in the virtual world.

## **Avatars**

There are many arguments for and against the use of avatars in educational activities. The 'learner as avatar' is often the flashpoint in discussions between pro- and anti-virtual world academics as to the effective use of this technology.

On the plus side, students and learners can personalise their appearance within an environment. Doing so gives (some) more confidence, as does the ability to control how they appear, while gaining extra skills in using the particular virtual world. People can flick between

shapes and clothing as they feel appropriate to the virtual world situation. In an educational group situation, commenting and helping each other on avatar modification helps students to collaborate and bond.

On the negative side, avatar configuration can be time consuming. Students who prefer the anonymity of being in a corner of the classroom may be uncomfortable with having an avatar which they feel others will judge. Appearances can be distracting during an educational exercise; are you focused on what the person is saying, or staring at his long forked tail?

### **Three questions for delegates**

- What are the most important factors in your choice of a virtual world?
- Does your department or research group have the resources, such as staff time, adequate PCs and development funding, to run sessions using virtual worlds such as Second Life?
- Are you involved in educational situations where using a virtual world may have some advantages?
- (Bonus question) If you have created an avatar, how easy - or difficult - was it to manipulate and orientate during your first few virtual world sessions?