

Chapter 6

Revisiting Musings on Co-Designing Identity-Aware Realities in Virtual Learning: The Shared Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Previously, musings on co-designing identity-aware realities in the virtual space focused on the individual self during a learning experience. While preserving the individual self of the learner for a comprehensive outlook, the chapter will expand on the exploratory journey looking into the identity of the collective self, the shared experiences of those co-creating the moment, and the potential for a community of practice to emerge while learning in virtual environments. In the spirit of the contemplative goal of the chapter, design considerations in the creation and facilitation of learning experiences inclusive of the community's self are postulated.

PREAMBLE

Virtual learning in the third dimension presents many opportunities for meaningful learning to occur. Learning in which the learner's self and the collective self immerse in the co-creation of authentic experiences. The virtues of these 3D environments are best appreciated holistically through the visual and spatial perspectives. To do so, participating learners, designers, and facilitators have the capabilities to exert more control over the visual, spatial, and emotional aspects of immersive 3D virtual worlds. The learner's self and the communities in which this learner belong immerse and co-create their experiences. Some of these experiences extend the physical into the virtual and vice versa.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9679-0.ch006

As previously posited, the evolutionary power to compute the human experience presents a myriad of opportunities to transform our self, society, and systems that govern us. The same guiding questions apply in contemplating design principles and process for immersive learning experiences in which the collective self is placed at the center of the design.

- What are the design considerations for integrating the individual and social selves in virtual learning?
- How do we facilitate meaning-making both in the physical and imagined realities?
- What are the value propositions of both the physical and virtual environments?
- How do we improve alignment to deliver beneficial learning experiences along the value chain proposed by both the physical and virtual?
- How do we facilitate an inclusive learning experience in which different perspectives are welcomed?

This book chapter addresses several of these questions and some of the prompts guiding the contemplations that follow.

VIRTUAL WORLD, VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT, OR VIRTUAL REALITY?

Although similar and used interchangeably, throughout the literature the definition of the terms virtual worlds (VW), virtual environments (VE), and virtual reality (VR) are slightly different. Some definitions reflect the technological evolution this media form has undergone since its inception. Peachey and Childs (2011) define virtual worlds as “computer-generated environments in which participants adopt an avatar to interact with each other and with the virtual environment around them” (p. 1). Fox, Arena, and Bailenson (2009) define virtual environments as “a digital space in which a user’s movements are tracked and his or her surroundings rendered, or digitally composed and displayed to the senses, in accordance with those movements” (p. 1). Schroeder (2011) defines virtual reality technology as “a computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a feeling of being present in an environment other than the one that they are actually in and to interact with that environment” (p. 4). In this chapter, the terms virtual worlds, virtual environments, and virtual reality are used interchangeably.

Many types of virtual worlds exist. Some worlds have predetermined common goals while others give their inhabitants the freedom to pursue and share their interests and purpose. The inhabitants’ imagination is the limit in the latter type of worlds. These virtual worlds are persistent, always on for its inhabitants to participate and create shared experiences. Like the man-made imagined realities in the form of economic and political systems (Harari, 2015), we live and breathe in our physical worlds. We have the power to imagine and create learning experiences that blend our physical and virtual realities.

To gauge the capabilities the self can leverage in these 3D virtual worlds, Stephen Ellis’ (1996), breakdown of virtual environments lend a helpful foundation. Ellis’ three main elements compose the virtual world or environment: 1) content which consists of the objects with which the learner interacts and the actor which in our case is the learner, 2) geometry which portrays the dimensions, rules, and range of possible values that make up the environment, and 3) the dynamics that rule the interactions between the objects and the learner. Awareness of these elements is key in guiding the type of learning experience and interactions that can emerge.

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