

Chapter 11

Designing Alien Mysteries in Chatterdale: An Instructor's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger, three-year long European project, Franziska reflected on her experiences in designing and implementing age-appropriate, immersive learning experiences in the virtual village of Chatterdale in OpenSim. Thirteen-year-old German and Norwegian students learning English as a target language engaged in collaborative goal-driven actions, task-oriented activities, and verbal interactions in a quest to solve a mystery involving extraterrestrials and the local residents' disappearance. Building on Barab, Gresalfi, and Arici's (2009) conceptualization of game-oriented environments as transformational activities, the focus was placed on investigating how the emerging affordances can empower learners and enact opportunities to actively participate in these game-driven learning experiences and mold the content and context. The study illustrated that the design of this virtual Chatterdale science fiction scenario was student-instigated, while students' quest to unravel the mystery afforded opportunities for active involvement and collaborative actions, engagement in verbal exchanges, and interaction with content and context.

INTRODUCTION

Multi-user virtual learning environments, such as OpenSim, Second Life, and Minecraft, can transform teachers' teaching practices and students' learning experiences if immersive, game-like but task-driven learning experiences are effectively

designed and implemented in the language curriculum. Many foreign language educators tend to agree that the semiotic resources enacted by the virtual characters, sculpted three-dimensional interactive environments featuring a wide multiplicity of objects, communication modes, the collaborative and playful nature of the virtual

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platform, the rich repertoire of engaging game-like activities and experiences can be deployed to build affordances for social interaction, creativity, intercultural exchanges, immersive language learning experiences, task-driven activities, and collaboration (see Gee, 2003, 2007; Young, Schrader, & Zheng, 2006; Allison, Cambell, Davies, Dow, Kennedy, McCafferty, Miller, Oliver, & Perera, 2012; Zheng, 2012; Godwin-Jones, 2014). Most studies in second or foreign language learning have been conducted in Second Life and more recently in Minecraft (see Molka-Danielsen & Deutchmann, 2009; Clark, 2009; Jauregi, Canto, de Graaff, Koenraad, & Moonen, 2012; Zheng, Newgarden, & Young, 2012; Zheng, 2012). The open-source virtual platform of Open Simulator (OpenSim) has received considerably less attention than other virtual platforms. Despite some initially promising findings on the prospect of enacting technological and cultural affordances in this virtual environment to immerse students in challenging, thought-provoking, motivating, fun, imaginary, and collaborative game-like activities (see Berns, Gonzalez-Pardo, & Camacho, 2011; Berns, Gonzalez-Pardo, & Camacho, 2013), few studies have been published on how second or foreign language educators can design transformational game-related activities in OpenSim (Barab, Gresalfi, & Arici, 2009). As Barab et al. (2009) demonstrate, “To play transformationally, a player must become a protagonist who uses the knowledge, skills, and concepts embedded in curricular content to make sense of a fictional situation and make choices that transform that situation” (p. 77). Such game-driven activities can also guide second or foreign language educators in investigating how “players deploy their agency in organizing their actions and interactions” (Zheng, Newgarden, & Young, 2012). That is, transformation is an agent-directed behavior where affordances emerge in the virtual learning environment, in this case OpenSim, that galvanize learners’ interactions and collaboratively enacted actions. Utilizing these semiotic resources, i.e., artifacts, avatars, and

actions, to immerse students in transformational learning activities, however, requires dexterity, extensive knowledge, and expertise. Language educators that are newly adopters of virtual learning environments, such as OpenSim, are often confronted with “technological barriers, institutional opposition, limited familiarity, and other concerns [that] may be preventing” them from fully exploring and utilizing such virtual environments in their language curricula (Neely, Bowers, & Ragas, 2010, p.3). Not all institutions have the technological infrastructure or the technical, pedagogical, and institutional support to train their teachers to design and deliver goal-determined activities in virtual environments (see Hubbard & Levy, 2006; Arnold, 2007; Arnold & Ducate, 2011). Some useful online pedagogical resources have been created for educators using OpenSim to enhance students’ learning experiences, such as OPENSIM-EDU (<http://opensim-edu.org/blog/>). However, even though these resources are insightful and extremely useful, they do not suffice for the successful implementation of OpenSim in the language curriculum as a path to enact affordances for transforming second/foreign language learners’ learning experiences. Second or foreign language educators need to go beyond these successful integrations in the different institutionally-supported contexts to explore new teaching possibilities and identify institutional, technological, and technical support and constraints for implementing OpenSim in their own curricula.

Moreover, Berns, Gonzalez-Pardo, & Camacho (2013) warn that the integration of game-based learning experiences in virtual platforms pose a particular challenge since they often fail to be designed around clearly exemplified learning goals and specifically defined tasks and activities. As a result, “many users get lost in the virtual environment and lose finally their interest in it” (p. 212). Other users, on the other hand, often get carried away by the interactive, game-driven nature of such virtual spaces and instead of focusing on task completion, they interact with the multiplic-

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