Chapter 20
Affordances in Virtual World Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, much has been made of the potential technological affordances of virtual world education and training. However, despite their potential utilization for useful simulations, virtual worlds are first and foremost open, social platforms. In this chapter, the author will explore both the technical affordances and the oft-ignored social affordances of virtual world learning groups. Drawing from the literature and over a decade of experience with learning communities in Linden Lab's Second Life, the author will use ethnographic data gleaned from participant observation in two very different learning groups to develop a basic taxonomy of technical and social affordances in avatar-based multi-user online environments. It is hoped that through the rubric provided, educators, researchers, and technology stewards will have a clearer understanding of both the possible benefits and the drawbacks of hosting learning communities in this environment.

INTRODUCTION

Before delving further into what avatar-based virtual worlds are and why they should be of interest to researchers and educators, it is important to contextualize them within the current rush to take advantage of online learning environments. Online learning is fast becoming an option for more and more students throughout the world, and demand is only increasing (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018; Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2019). As of 2014, it was estimated that approximately 5.8 million students in the United States take at least one online course as part of their formal post-secondary education (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 4). Perhaps just as significantly, there has been an explosion of cost-free online resources for independent learners of every sort, from coaching sites such as the Khan Academy (2020) to online lecture repositories such as TED.com (TED: Ideas worth spreading, 2020). It does not end there, especially in relation to areas like language learning; for example, the Internet is able to engage autonomous language learners with a variety of opportunities to integrate language, content, and culture (Warschauer

& Meskill, 2000). As Davidson and Goldberg (2010) stated, "the Internet offers unprecedented access to an enormous range of information and the possibility of an extraordinary range of learning modalities, not all of which have been tested" (p. 23). This makes study of online learning communities one of the most dynamic and fascinating fields within education research.

One particular area that requires research is that of online virtual world communities. These communities have been purported to offer a potential nexus of learning, cultural immersion, new media, intercultural encounters, role-play and authentic communication (Svensson, 2003, p. 140). However, when novel communication technologies are implemented, one can never be certain that new modes of discourse and interaction do not vary substantially from modes that the majority of learners are accustomed to (Schwienhorst, 2008, p. 3), and this is to be expected owing to the wide range of participatory and collaborative interaction now possible, at a distance, both synchronous and asynchronous (Davidson & Goldberg, 2010, p. 88). In the case of virtual world learning communities, learning does not take place only during specified lesson times; social engagement itself—both in and outside formal instruction—becomes the site for the creation of knowledge and meaningful academic outcomes. Howe and Mercer (2007) observed that it is often outside of the class that students develop communicative skills (p. 18). Within a persistent environment, the community and community space do not disappear when a user turns off one's computer; extended discussion, gaming, and other collaborative activities between scheduled classes can occur within this space. Though this is similar to life on a brick and mortar college campus, this kind of situation is less likely to naturally occur in other online forums and course management software.

Since the global Covid-19 crisis of 2020, in which many classes have been forced online, the limitations of current course management and video conferencing software have become apparent. Educators and administrators are still scrambling to find more effective options to allow for in-class collaboration and smoother interaction between classroom participants. It is important not to neglect the potential affordances of online virtual world environments, and this chapter is dedicated to providing some sense of what educators and education researchers should expect to find in such platforms, especially Linden Lab's Second Life.

This chapter is presented in four sections. In Background: The Rise of MOOs and MUVEs, the author provides a short history of the evolution of virtual world platforms, with a focus on education research and the use of Linden Lab's Second Life (SL) platform. SL has had its critics over the years, and this section will conclude with a brief discussion of some common issues, controversies and problems with the platform.

The second section, Second Life Research Sites, will discuss the two primary communities studied by the author. The first, Cypris Chat, is an English language learning community, while the second, The Firefly Companion's Guild is a training school for science-fiction role-players within SL. Culling information from over a decade's worth of ethnographic research within these two communities, the author explores the rules, strategies and gamification elements that contributed to their extended popularity.

The third section, Affordances, synthesizes what the author has learned from his work within the two aforementioned research sites in SL, and provides two sets of guidelines related to technological and social affordances of Second Life educational communities. These two lists hopefully provide the reader with a set of possible benefits of utilizing virtual world communities for education, and is intended for teachers, administrators and researchers considering exploring Second Life and future virtual world platforms as online learning options.

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