

## Chapter 7

# Virtual Worlds: New Ways of Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*Virtual worlds for adults (e.g. Second Life), youth (e.g. Habbo) and children (e.g. Whyville) have a great potential for learning and teaching practices for enriching wider public and engendering collective experience and collaboration. Informal learning environments such as educational virtual worlds offer children and adults various intellectual and sensory activities or “crystallized” experiences with reinforcing multiple intelligences, according to Gardner. Virtual worlds promote social interaction and offer visitors an opportunity for various interactive activities which can sometimes not be realized in real life education. Children and adults can explore and learn in a different way and from a different perspective, e.g. with educational games and simulations. Virtual worlds represent a new medium that allows people to connect in new virtual ways and offer new challenges in the educational field.*

### INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies such as virtual worlds, serious games, wikis and social networking sites have been heralded as technologies that are powerful enough to transform learning and teaching. When we think of learning, school comes to mind first. However, many people, especially the disadvantaged, do not achieve their full potential through traditional educational approaches for a variety

of reasons. A lot of valuable learning also takes place outside school, often facilitated by digital technologies, for example, through online games. Mobile technologies and internet can provide access to rich digital media content and facilitate communication with others both local and remote to provide powerful learning experiences that go well beyond the traditional classroom.

Due to new technologies new approaches to learning become possible, diversifying the range of learning experiences available, and thereby engaging with people who have not achieved their

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full potential with more traditional approaches. Many new approaches to learning and teaching are facilitated by new technologies. In addition to the real world, online world contains a whole range of virtual worlds in which we can live our second (virtual) life. Although virtual worlds for children, youth and adults differ according to their content, they offer an opportunity to learn in a virtual learning environment and have great potential for learning activities.

Virtual worlds are persistent virtual environments that allow for interaction through which people experience others as being there with them (Schroeder, 2006). These interactive online three-dimensional virtual environments are possible to visit 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Castronova, 2005). Virtual worlds are designed for different age groups, children, youth and adults, and separated in terms of content. Some of them emphasize education (Whyville), while others focus on role play (Gaia), fashion (Stardoll), music (vSide), sports, television, movies and books (Virtual MTV), toys and games from the real world (Barbie Girls), casual games (Club Penguin), socializing (Habbo), creating the content of the virtual world (Second Life).

In all virtual worlds the player is physically represented by his/her virtual person – avatar, whose appearance is chosen and changed by each player alone (e.g. colour and length of hair, clothes, shoes, equipment...). Avatars can be people (Whyville, Barbie Girls, Second Life), house pets (Webkinz), fantasy creatures (Funkeytown), animals (Club Penguin), monsters (Moshi Monster)...

How do education keep up with virtual worlds and leisure trends? Virtual worlds are attracting interest from different organizations as platforms for learning. Also known as immersive environments, these systems can provide significant advantages over other learning strategies.

Virtual worlds are also creating opportunities for activities, which can not be realized in real life education. Above all, children can explore things and learn in a different way and from a

different perspective. On this basis the paper will analyze some of learning possibilities and opportunities in educational virtual worlds for children (e.g. Whyville, Handipoints...) with millions of registered accounts. It is important to create an environment which would enable children to construct their knowledge on their own or through interaction with peers, adults, objects, learning games and other activities.

## **THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGY**

When designing learning activities in virtual learning environments we have to take into account some of the following theorists of learning: Dewey (1963) and his concept of experiential learning, Piaget's (1990) theory of construction of knowledge, Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning as a constant cyclic process and Gardner's (1991) theory of multiple intelligences. Moreover, we should also consider Vygotsky's (1978) theory which emphasizes the social component of learning, Gogala's (2005) idea of experiential pedagogy and the flow concept proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (2002).

A recent pedagogic concept which is important for designing interactive learning environments is the idea of experiential pedagogy proposed by Slovene pedagogue Stanko Gogala (2005). He claims that a successful development of child's personality requires experience - emotional exchange, a feeling that in a suitable situation enables us to become aware of the problem and work to benefit from its dismissal. However, in order to do this, we have to design encouraging environments and assure diverse experiences, considering interests of the children involved and offering possibility of choice in which children become involved in interactions with different objects, materials, peers, adults... A child is encouraged to get involved in a certain exciting activity that drags him into a circle of intense experiencing and

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