Chapter 38
Designing and Developing the Virtual English Adventure in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the process of design and development of the Virtual English Adventure in Second Life. The in-depth description and explanation of designing and developing the tasks and activities involved in the Virtual English Adventure project provides the scale and amount of time and effort required to utilize a virtual tool for educational purposes. The Virtual English Adventure is particularly designed for English teaching and learning. The virtual world configurations, such as level tests, teleporting, missions, e-learning, interaction, gaming, and learning-facilitators, are related to both learning theories and language teaching pedagogy. Based on our own experiences, there are some important recommendations for instructional designers and researchers to consider when they design and develop the educational use of a virtual world.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-762-3.ch038

INTRODUCTION

There has been discussion on the potential advantage of using Second Life in education. The active participation of learners in the learning process and their experiential learning are main focuses in such critical discourse. Learning through edutainment, which is a combination of education and entertainment, is not simply an option anymore, but a requirement for the new generation. Our new clients these days are described as "digital natives" or the "game generation". They are learning with complex thinking and strategies while they are playing with technologies. In this context, constructing a learning environment in a virtual space such as Second Life can be a desirable tool to understand these learners' needs and to meet their diverse learning styles.

Second Life is a virtual world developed by Linden Lab and is accessible via the Internet. A free client program called the Second Life Viewer enables its users (Residents) to interact with each other through using avatars. Residents can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities. In addition, they create and trade virtual property and enjoy pastimes, or travel throughout in-world.

Use of Second Life in education can be extremely advantageous in several aspects (Bransford & Gawel, 2006). First, it creates a sense of sharing amongst the groups members met online. Second Life supports to create a strong sense of collaborative community. Second, Second Life provides an environment that expands their ideas through interoperability. In Second Life, participants can merge objects with other things built within Second Life. Third, Second Life makes it possible to create interactive learning experiences that would be hard to duplicate in real life. Bruce (2007) described the development of educational games for 8th grade science at Alexander Middle School using Second Life. Graduate students at Ohio University developed computer games in Second Life to improve learning in Appalachian Ohio middle school science classes. The two games were "The Sugar and Water Solubility Experiment" and "Rafting Adventures".

During the creation and use of the games in Second Life for a middle school science class, there were positive results along with a few problems. Bilyeu (2007) reported that the students' responses to using Second Life were very reassuring in that they found playing these games a fun way to learn the science material. However, in spite of many advantages of using Second Life as a teaching and learning environment, it has some serious limitations. The most problematic feature of Second Life is virtual lecturing and presentation because avatars can block users' views by standing up or flying around during lectures and presentations. Moreover, unnecessary informal chatting during the lectures might distract other users from hearing the lectures clearly. Wagner (2008) found similar problems with Second Life. Holding class meetings in a virtual world with large student groups is difficult, as many students enjoy their 3-D freedoms to buzz around the virtual classroom, chat, or even speak via microphone. It creates significant back-channel noise. Moreover, Cliburn and Gross (2008) found that students were not able to distinguish the professor's texts in the chat box from other students' text. Another problem was emerged regarded the correlation of students' learning curve with Second Life. It can be quite time consuming for learners who aren't computer literate to use and navigate Second Life effectively. Students who are new to Second Life might feel frustrated while they are learning in Second Life. In addition, students get easily distracted in Second Life by things not related to the given task. Students' walking around to places other than completing the given task was also an issue. These problems draw the attention of instructional designers to the importance of designing and implementing Second Life for educational purposes.