Second Life as a Virtual Classroom

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Abstract

Second Life is an Internet-based virtual environment. It is a parallel world that can accommodate the majority of activities that take place in the physical world. Freed from the constraints of the physical world, Second Life also introduces a new set of possibilities for communication, collaboration and interaction.

Second Life can also act as an immersive and engaging virtual learning environment, similar to Wimba Live Classroom, Elluminate, Macromedia Breeze, etc. It contains most of the features of these systems, with the addition of an immersive, navigable three-dimensional environment. For the instructor, it opens entirely new ways to teach, to test, and to use technology as a pedagogical tool.

Second Life allows learners to create and recreate their identities. Participants create their own bodies (avatars) and act as independent learners in a world free of the restraints of a brick and mortar educational environment.

It also enables its residents to learn, unlearn and relearn information and behaviors as quickly as they humanly can. Because the nature of Second Life is inherently democratic, students leave behind the personality dynamics that may entangle them in a physical classroom. They engage with each other, the course material, and the environment in a unique and powerful way.

Introduction

Distance education is a response to the problem of access, most often arising from issues of location, timing or physical ability. The origins of virtual, or distance education, can be traced to correspondence courses first offered in the 18th century. Before the advent of the Internet, televised college classes also functioned as virtual learning environments.

In the 1960s, the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) system was developed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. PLATO was one of the first computer-based instruction systems. It pioneered many of the tools and techniques used in online communities: instant messaging, email, chat rooms, message

boards and multiplayer games all grew out of PLATO. This system remained operational until the mid-1990s.

In the 1990s, the marketing of inexpensive personal computers, the evolution of a worldwide networking infrastructure (the Internet), and the invention of HTML led to the World Wide Web. The explosive growth of the Web as tool for communication and collaboration has led to a proliferation of opportunities for distance education.

Features of the Virtual Classroom

Distance education can involve a selection of web-based tools, learning spaces and collaborative workspaces generated by computers and linked by the World Wide Web.

Distance education not only solves the problem of learners and instructors separated by time or space (or both); it can dramatically improve the quality and effectiveness of the learning experience. It can provide:
- o Options for users to communicate either in real-time (chat, voice conferencing, video conferencing, etc.) or asynchronously (discussion boards, online forums, email, etc.),
- o Shared spaces for users to collaborate via document sharing, wikis, blogs, websites, etc.,
- o Round-the-clock access to learning materials,
- o Access to subject matter experts outside the student's geographic area,
- o Opportunities to interact with students all over the world,
- o Strategies to engage "digital natives" who are accustomed to the participatory dynamic that the Read-Write Web (web 2.0) provides.

One tool used for distance education is Virtual Classroom software, such as Wimba Live Classroom, Elluminate, etc. Virtual Classrooms unite many of the Distance Education tools into one interface. Most Virtual Classrooms feature:
- o Participant list,
- o Whiteboard,
- o Application sharing capability,
- o Duplex audio,
- o Shared web browser,
- o Text chat,
- o Polling/Interaction tool,
- o Recording capability for delayed viewing.

Most Virtual Classroom softwares try to mimic the functions and activities that take place in the traditional physical classroom. In the Virtual Classroom, students can,
- o Raise their hands,
- o Participate in polls,
- o Learn new software,
- o Take assessments,
- o Use whiteboards,

- o Take notes,
- o Use chat to communicate to all the participants,
- o Use chat to communicate to instructors,
- o Use voice-over Internet protocol (VOIP) or teleconference to communicate,
- o Participate in breakout groups,
- o Signal using thumbs up/thumbs down, applause or laughter.
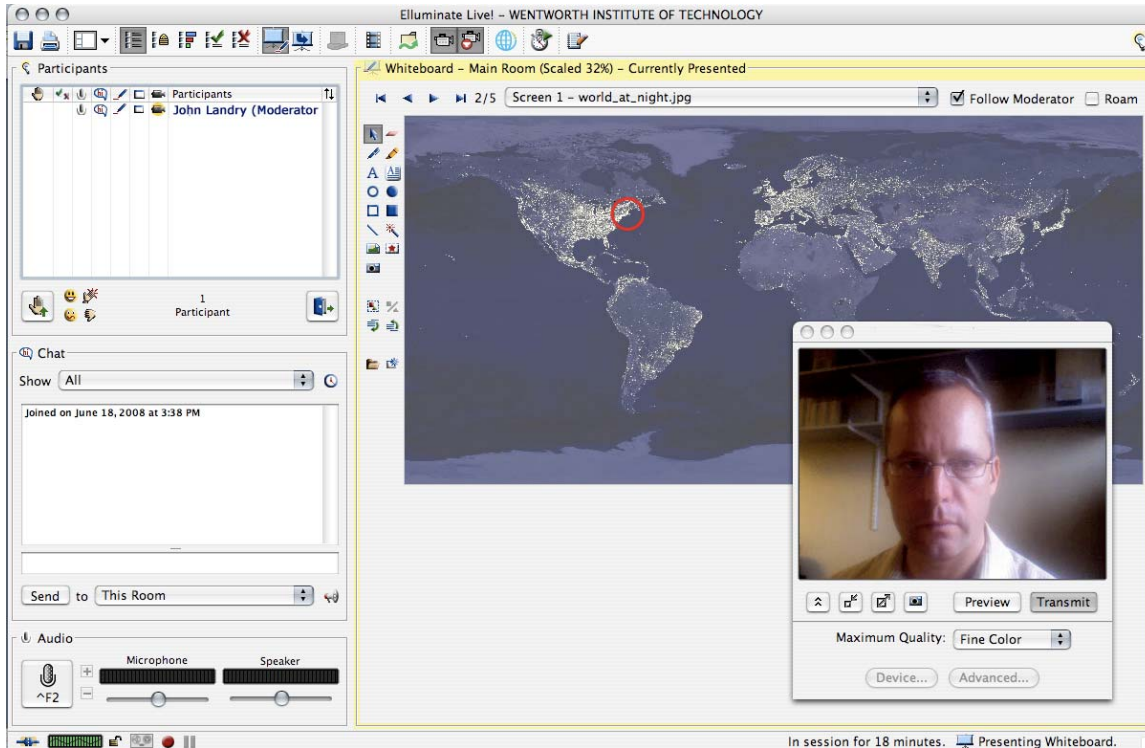
Second Life and Virtual Worlds

Web-based virtual worlds are simulated environments in which users navigate and interact. They can be text-based, 2-dimensional or 3-dimensional. Virtual worlds can function as an extension of the user's day-today reality, or they can be used as a substitute or escape from that reality.

The virtual world Second Life is accessed by using a free program that is downloaded and run on the user's computer. As a graphical user interface, Second Life depicts space visually, as a 3-dimensional environment.

Participants are indicated by avatars, movable icons that represent that person (the word avatar is borrowed from the Hindu concept of an incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a deity, person or idea). These avatars are completely customizable. Participants can choose all aspects of their physical makeup, even to the degree of how humanoid they wish to appear.

As in most interactive web environments, participants can represent themselves as they are in "real" life, or they can choose to reinvent themselves and their personas.

Communication and The Classroom Dynamic in Second Life

Residents of Second Life can use all of the same communication tools that are available in the Virtual Classroom environment: they can use a text-based chat, or use a microphone (via VOIP) to speak. Documents can be shared and downloaded. Video can be embedded directly into the Second Life environment.

Online education always brings with it a change in the dynamics of classroom behaviors. Non-verbal cues can be negatively misinterpreted across cultures, or within a closed community. Many students who are intimidated by participating in a physical classroom find it easier to share opinions and respond to others in the online environment.

Second Life also communicates the structure of the learning community by making it visible to its participants; the classroom is not represented as a list of names, but as a group of participants gathered in one location. The visual simulation of a community of learners is ultimately more engaging than any textual representation. The fact that the individuals have determined their own individual appearances also empowers the "residents" to participate more actively.

Conclusion

Second Life is currently used by hundreds of major colleges and universities as an education platform. It is an appealing and engaging environment to hold classes and lectures. Although there is a somewhat steep learning curve to access all of its features, new users can participate relatively soon after creation of their avatars. It has application across many disciplines. Its interactivity and immediacy outpace that of 2-D virtual classroom and web-conferencing softwares. Second Life will inevitably have a profound on the way online education is conducted.

References

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