Using a Virtual World for High-Impact Educational Practices

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Abstract

Aztlan Island, SDSU in Second Life, was an initiative demonstrating the use of a 3D virtual world to facilitate high-impact educational practices (HIEPs) [1] in a large, urban public university. High-impact educational practices include capstone courses and projects, common intellectual experiences, undergraduate research, study abroad and internships. They contribute to increases in student retention and academic success [1] by providing students with tailored learning experiences aligned with their academic and life goals.

The Second Life platform is an online, 3D virtual world. It is also a user-created, 3D-design space that affords users highly personalized, high-tech [2] learning through world-building [3]. World-builders create and manipulate 3D objects and space, and manipulate computer code to add interactivity to them. World-builders also embody an avatar through which they inhabit their design space with others, and through which they encounter "authentic modes of being" [4], such as walking through their built spaces and observing others interacting with them. With these affordances in mind, virtual world-building accommodates as least three aims of HIEPs. First, it is a learner-centric endeavor by providing a context for students to generate and measure their own learning objectives. Second, it is a real-world endeavor. Students acquire skills and knowledge relevant to their everyday and professional lives. And third, virtual worlds are cultural locations of human endeavors students will encounter throughout their lives.

One focus of the Aztlan Island initiative to give students in art and design disciplines opportunities to world-build in academically significant ways. To do this, the initiative provided virtual space, pedagogical and technical support, and encouragement to faculty and students to explore its potential in these disciplines.

This paper begins by describing high-impact educational practices and the goals of the Aztlan Island initiative. It then describes the process and impact of two projects. In the first project, students created 3D models of campus architectural landmarks for the island. This was an extra credit project in an upper-level undergraduate television set design course. In the second project, students conceptualized and built an art gallery exhibit. This was for the capstone project of an upper-level undergraduate art gallery exhibit design course. Four students and two faculty members were involved in these projects. Data are drawn from interviews, emails, observations, and project documentation and artifacts.

References

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