Getting started in virtual worlds with the EUROVERSITY Network

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1. Introduction
The EUROVERSITY Network brings together partners with experience of and an interest in virtual worlds and virtual reality for educational purposes in a number of subject areas including foreign languages and minority languages, linguistics, teacher training, maths, geometry, physics, drama, literature, visual arts and new media, business and management studies. The initial idea behind the EUROVERSITY consortium was to pool together, consolidate and make more widely available existing and emergent knowledge in the field, in particular for those educational organisations with an interest in starting to use virtual worlds as an educational platform for the first time. The backbone of the EUROVERSITY Network can be found in several projects the consortium partners had been involved in prior to EUROVERSITY and which had also been co-funded under the LLP. These projects were concerned not only with the use of virtual worlds for education but also with establishing guidelines for e-learning best practice and telecollaboration activities in general. These projects are: AVALON [1], NiFlar [2], AVATAR [3], START [4], e-LERU [5], Wideminds [6], ReVICA [7].

2. Virtual worlds and virtual reality
Virtual worlds are computer programmes which simulate a 3D or 2D world or space with which a user or “player” can interact in different ways. In general, the user, who is represented graphically and iconically with what is often called an “avatar”, can move around and do things in the simulated environment and, if the type of programme allows it, interact and communicate with other users of the world he or she is in. The term “world” and “reality” are used commonly in an attempt by the creators and users of these environments to describe the computer simulated space in which players are active. And, in the end, as all computer simulations are created or designed by people, they inevitably express, represent and reflect those human understandings of space, worlds and reality which are embedded in our cultural and experiential knowledge. And indeed, in some cases, these spaces look and feel very realistic. For example, in these worlds we might find landscapes with mountains and rivers which are familiar to us from our everyday life experiences, homes with replicas of everyday utensils and users wearing clothes that we recognise as clothing we would normally wear or choose for ourselves. At the same time, however, we can also find user imaginings and creator simulations of space and places we associate, for example, with mythology, fantasy, dreaming and specific cultural and artistic traditions. In addition to this, in the same computer generated space one may also see infinite combinations of what we may consider to be “realistic” on the one hand and “fantastic” or “unrealistic” on the other.

These worlds, or “virtual worlds” as they are commonly referred to, are created for the general public who subscribe to them either for gaming or entertainment purposes. In some cases the programme is created for use by a single individual on a personal computer. In other cases, the programme is designed for online use where many users can access the space at the same time and interact with other users or players. An example of just a few of the most well-known worlds for gaming and entertainment are The SIMS™ [8], World of Warcraft™ [9] and Second Life™ [10]. More recently, however, virtual worlds have started to appeal to educational bodies with a commitment and interest in e-learning and distance education as a platform for interaction among remotely displaced users or learners. In general, virtual world platforms can be used in place of the more common video-conferencing tools or in combination with these according to the teaching and learning goals of the educational provider. Some teachers and educational bodies choose to use existing virtual worlds and adapt their teaching methods and content to the specific features and characteristics of the world they have chosen to use. Other educators may prefer to have their institution build their own world which they can tailor more specifically to their teaching and learning needs. For a recent review of some of the most common virtual world options for language education, for example, see the AVALON project Comparative Study of 3D Environments [11]. Some of the more common features of these environments which make them particularly suited as distance education platforms are their real-time multimodal communication features including text chat and voice chat, the capability of the user to move around within the space and from one space to another and the interaction potential with the space and its objects. The specific added value of virtual...
worlds for education, however, when compared with the more static video-conferencing tools, lie in the sense of **immersiveness** afforded by the visual context and the increased options of collaboration and participation among geographically dispersed learners, in particular the possibility of “building” together and “doing” together. For students of the hard sciences, these worlds also allow for the carrying out experiments which are either impractical, too costly or too dangerous to be carried out in the classroom or which just cannot be simulated in the shared space of video-conferencing tools for example. For language education, the added value can be extended even further to include **impromptu** encounters with native speakers of the student’s target language and more realistic simulations of cultural exchanges. In particular, virtual worlds lend themselves to activities that question notions of identity and representation of culture as explored, for example, within the ASSIS project [12]. And, last but not least, virtual worlds can also be used as living textbooks for heritage languages as has been the case with the **Språkens hus** (“House of languages”) project and North Sami [13].

3. **Partners and partner roles**

The Network involves nineteen partners from ten European countries and Israel and is coordinated by the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Hull in the UK. Of these organisations, 14 are tertiary education and research institutions and 5 are smaller consulting and non-for-profit educational organisations. A significant number of the partners involved have direct experience of the use of virtual world platforms for education and training. Other partners are experienced in distance education and e-learning pedagogy in general and/or in quality assurance in education including the creation of models for the transfer of knowledge.

The partners are listed below as they appear in the project application:
1) Dept. Modern Languages/School of Arts and New Media, University of Hull, UK;
2) Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Jura, France;
3) “Guglielmo Marconi” Open University, Italy;
4) University of Utrecht, Netherlands;
5) TELLConsult, Netherlands;
6) Molde University College, Norway;
7) Umeå University, Sweden;
8) School of Education, University of Manchester, UK;
9) University of Strasbourg, France;
10) Linnaeus University, Sweden;
11) FOR.COM, Italy;
12) Verein Offenes Lernen, Austria;
13) University of Coimbra, Portugal;
14) KIOS Research Center for Intelligent Systems and Networks, University of Cyprus, Cyprus;
15) University of Bielefeld, Germany;
16) ICC International Certificate Conference e.V, Germany;
17) Christian Albrechts University of Kiel, Germany;
18) Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden;
19) Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, Israel.

4. **EUROVERSITY** Network aims

The aim of this project is to establish a Network designed to collaboratively share good practice in virtual worlds with the wider community of interested organisations/individuals across disciplinary boundaries, and at different levels of education. This good practice will be shared in the creation of what has been identified as a **good practice framework**. This guidance will come from the significant experience shared from within the Network. To this end, the Network has identified five core objectives. These are:
1) The sharing of experiences and pooling of community knowledge through the collection of existing materials and the creation of an experiential video bank capturing approaches to key stages in the initiation, design and delivery of courses in online virtual worlds.
2) The transformation of the collective experiences of teaching and learning within virtual worlds into a good practice framework.
3) The evaluation of the good practice framework in new course contexts which in turn will result in a re-drafting of the framework to take into account the analysis of findings made in these new contexts.
4) Exploitation of existing resources from within the Network of project partners.
5) Dissemination of the project’s activity across multiple national and international contexts, ensuring the growth of the Network and widespread use of the good practice framework.
5. EUROVERSITY Network activities

The four main activities of the Network in support of the above listed aims are: growing the Network, pooling existing knowledge, providing public access to the knowledge base in different formats and creating a framework for the transfer of existing expertise to new contexts.

5.1 Growing the Network

Alongside the most common dissemination and networking activities, the Network will devote special attention to identifying bodies or individuals who can contribute knowledge to the knowledge database. Actions will be taken to encourage virtual world practitioners to take part in the professional debate around the use of virtual worlds in education in support of both the Network and their own practice. At the same time, the Network will proceed to identify strategies to help educational professionals with no knowledge of virtual worlds to become acquainted with the added value of this specific educational medium. These strategies include the identification of institutional, practical and cultural barriers to the use of virtual worlds in educational contexts in general and the carrying out of training workshops in particularly receptive contexts as also discussed in section 5.4 below on Models for transferring expertise to new contexts.

5.2 Pooling knowledge

As part of this activity, the Network partners will contribute and make available all existing materials and documentation concerning virtual world education in their possession. Strategies and actions will also be put into place so that knowledge can be drawn into the database from sources outside the Network. Creative Commons copyright strategies will be put into place to facilitate the sharing and collection of knowledge from within and outside the Network.

5.3 Providing public access to the knowledge base

This area of activity includes the systematic organisation of all existing materials and documentation concerning teaching and learning in virtual worlds. It involves identifying procedures and implementing actions so that materials and information are easily searchable online, are collected in easy to access electronic formats and appear in relevant databases. To this end, Network partners will also work closely with their institutional libraries to create pathways for library access to the online materials.

5.4 Models for transferring expertise to new contexts

Activities carried out in this area will focus on the collection of case studies from within the varied Network partnership in order to identify the most appropriate strategies for the efficient and effective transfer of best practice in virtual world education to educational contexts which are not familiar with the applications of virtual world platforms in education. Once the models for transfer are in place, pilot courses will be run with interested parties and feedback will be sought.

Concluding remarks

The EUROVERSITY Network aims to become a point of reference for both practitioners working with virtual worlds in their specific educational contexts and for practitioners with no background in the field by providing state-of-the-art information, ongoing support and training. Last but not least, EUROVERSITY is committed to participating in and contributing to the debate around the added value of virtual words not only as a platform for education and training but also as a research medium and a tool for reflection within the broader field of online and distance education and modern languages and linguistics [14].

References


