Virtual Worlds in Education: Educational Utopias?

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Abstract

Virtual worlds boom at an incredible speed, people's minds are conquered by computerized media. Some forecast a complete victory of virtual learning environments over conventional education. This paper attempts to define the major characteristics and educational principles of virtual learning environments, examines the process how education integrates VEs or VEs integrate education, summing the potentials, benefits and dangers.

In 2007 Gartner, the world's leading information technology research company, predicted that by the end of 2011 eighty percent of active internet users will have some kind of participation in some kind of a virtual world. If Gartner's prediction is fair, by the end of this year this will mean approximately 1.6 billion people, an incredibly huge audience. The presence and importance of virtual worlds are unquestionable, the social impact created by them, the threats and the opportunities are yet to be analyzed, along with the challenges, gains and losses created by using virtual environments in education.

The paper presents:

- The emergence of virtual worlds in education
- The ideal educational software environment and its potentials
- The social benefits of applying virtual learning environments in teaching
- What is at loss in virtuality
- Forecasts and predictions regarding the future applications of VLEs

In conclusion it will be pointed out that virtual environments can provide grand opportunities for educational purposes, both in a technical and in a social sense, and this should be exploited to a larger extent when building educational strategies. There is no way to build limits to the spread of VW participations, educationists real challenge is to channel this immense participation in a beneficial direction and handle the downsides not to find themselves in an educational dystopia.