Virtual Worlds: A new tool?

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What are virtual worlds?

- Virtual words have 3D computer simulated environments

- Multiple users can interact ad communicate with each other using their **avatars**
  - Digital representation of a real person
  - Takes part in virtual activities
  - Can manipulate objects

Virtual worlds

- Virtual worlds are used increasingly for
    - Games
    - Education
    - Socialising
    - Information exchange
    - Business
- Second Life was launched in 2003

Who uses virtual worlds?

- All sorts of people including:
  - People with disability
  - Educators
  - Students
  - Employers
  - People like you and me

Uses for people with disability

- Learning about health
- Practising social interaction for real life situations
- Road safety

- Support groups
- Developing disability 'pride' in a safe environment
- **Fun?**
- **Friends?**

The dark side

- Yes it may be there
- No it is not more dangerous than any other social networking tool
- Usual 'web hygiene'
- No personal information such as addresses, accounts
- Know how to teleport home
- Know how to switch off
- Report abuse to Linden lab

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Teaching and learning about disability

- Students need opportunities to:
  - Interact with people with disability
  - Learn from them
  - Practise communication
  - Recognise that having a disability does not equate with having no skills to offer

What the literature suggests

- Virtual worlds have untapped potential for learning about disability

- People with disability can interact at a 'more equal level' which offers new research directions

- Virtual worlds offer flexible and fun teaching and learning environments

- Communicative interactions are simplified

- Currently virtual worlds are be under utilised in the field of disability

Projects in second life

- Norges Universitetet projekt

- www.telemed.no

- Pilot project

- Learning about disability through lectures on the internet

- Is Second Life a useful medium for learning about disability?

Lectures streamed through telemed.no

- People with disability had no trouble thinking about what they wanted to students to know
- Lectures were not difficult to prepare or film
- Lectures were 'bought' for three years

Advantages

- Students could watch the videos whenever they liked
- Good teaching resource
- Good benefits for some of the lecturers
- Good 'profiling' and community interest

Talking about disability in Second Life

- Real time interaction
- Students did some joint activities with people with disability in Second life
  - Wheelchair racing
  - Wheelchair foot ball
  - Camp fire meeting
  - Meeting in a jazz club - Zelli's place in virtual Montmartre

Students said

- Lectures more interesting
- More meaningful
- Much better than listening to boring lecturers
- Fun to learn in a new environment
- Great to be able to do this from home

BUT

- Second Life difficult to learn to use

- One lecturer with Down syndrome liked using Second life

- One with cerebral palsy said it was OK but real life much more interesting

- One lecturer with Aspergers liked the medium but did not want to talk to students

Project 2

- Norwegian Research Council
- What do adults with ID do in their leisure time in Norway?
- What do people with ID know about Second Life?
- How would they like to use it?
- What do they enjoy doing in Second Life?
- What do educators think of Second Life as an environment for people with ID?

What do adults with ID do in their leisure time in Norway?

- What other Norwegians do BUT always in 'disability specific groups' or with their families

- People noted it was boring to be stuck at home with parents

- All know about and most used facebook

- About 25% had heard of Second Life

How would people with ID like to use Second Life?

- Travel
- Driving fast cars
- Meeting people
- Finding a girlfriend
- Joining military groups
- No one said to learn 'skills'

What people with ID said

- *"My avatar is a real great guy. I wish he had a mohawk, a green mohawk, short pants and a plaid jacket."*

- *To hit things (objects) on the right spot is a little hard. For example, yesterday when we were on the boat I tried to click it to move it, but it would not move*

- *"I do better with voice. At home I have a program on my computer which helps me with the writing, in*

the lab I do not have this and that makes the text chat harder

What teachers said

- It is worth the effort but it doesn't suit everyone
- I would rather go to a sex room with some of my guys than have them only access the sites they use now
- We will use it (SL) in out literacy group
- Practise is everything

Conclusions

- Virtual worlds have potential
- Socialising is not always easy but warrant further exploration
- The group activity was rewarding
- It is a valuable teaching tool and has exciting potential in our field
- Whether flying or exploring, virtual worlds can offer a sense of freedom and independence

A final word

- I could fly away and do things by myself for the first time ever

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