Virtual Worlds: A new tool?

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What are virtual worlds?

• Virtual worlds have 3D computer simulated environments
• Multiple users can interact and 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
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 underutilised 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 our 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
References


