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A case study of teaching religion using the Second Life®

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Abstract. With all the social changes brought by the technology, also in the teaching/learning processes we need to adapt the traditional curricula to a brand new generation of students, who are perfectly aware of this digital world. According to this idea and based on some research that is being made in the educational field using didactic games and 3D platforms, can predict that those platforms will become the most common way to meet one another, both in distance learning and business. Therefore, we used one of the most common 3D platforms, the Second Life (SL), to study its use for religious teaching. For this purpose we carried out a case study, during 3 different lessons and involving 4 different grade classes. At the end students were asked to answer a questionnaire. The results obtained are quite positive showing a wide range of opportunities for future usage and implementation of this kind of 3D and virtual world material, such as Second Life.

Keywords: Second Life, Virtual Worlds, Religion, Education, 3D Platforms, Teaching, Research, Learning.

1 Introduction

In the so-called revolution in information technology emerged in the late twentieth century, we now live in "a period characterized by the transformation of our cultural material, created by a new paradigm organized around information technology." [1] Therefore, the "information technologies are not simply tools to be applied, but processes to be developed" [1]. So, it is natural that in the teaching and learning process it will be necessary to move on from the traditional model of education, and consequently the adaptation of curricula and practices to a new generation of students who are perfectly aware of this digital world.

Traditionally we can say that the internet is a way of communication and socialization, gaining every day a greater number of supporters [2]. The multiplicity of tools and contents in the virtual space offer a wide range of possibilities responding of the vast majority of its customers, as they have at their own disposal the potential of web 2.0 tools and, among other things, virtual worlds. In this sense, the use of virtual platforms starts to be seen by several authors as the future of human interaction in the network globalized world [3].

The use and implementation of virtual worlds in educational context dates back to 1970 [4], but the researches and studies on the use of 3D virtual platforms in education have been developed over the past two decades [5]. Many educators are using virtual worlds for various reasons [6]. There are already numerous experiments that have been developed using virtual worlds in education, from architecture, biology, medicine, geography, history, arts, learning languages, astronomy, science, computers, etc. [7] In fact, the main Universities all over the world have a virtual and active presence in Second Life ® (SL). This does anticipate the enormous educational potential.

These environments allow a huge amount of experiences that are often difficult to find them in the real world (inside or outside the classroom). Whether due to economic conditions or restrictions of time and space, these platforms become a great resource for teachers. Specifically and particularly for this study, these virtual worlds allow us to explore and move to various places that would otherwise be almost inaccessible, or at least would be very difficult to move a group of people in a short space of time for these destinations.

This article presents a case study using a 3D platform used in an educational context, the SL, in order to understand its use in the teaching of religion. We will make a theoretical approach to the use of virtual worlds in education. On the following section will present some results of the case study developed with students from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade in a Portuguese public school. Finally, conclusions and some perspectives for future studies are presented.

2 Some theoretical ideas about the use of the virtual worlds at school

2.1 Second Life® in education

Second Life ®, along with many other "virtual worlds, are not themselves games" [8]. It is a tridimensional, free and multi-user platform (3D). It is only necessary to have a personal computer with the application installed and a broadband connection to the Internet. Like many other virtual worlds, SL is an immersive environment and fully envisioned, designed, built and maintained by its own users (residents - avatars). We can also mention that can be a real life simulator, allowing all kind of experiences and studies in a heavily regulated and secure environment, only limited by our imagination. [7]

The communication promoted by SL in real time (chat, voice, private messages, gestures, expressions, etc.) allows to teaching a class, since collaboration and instant sharing of content, coupled with the communication factor, enhance interactivity. [9]

In addition to the potential of this tool, there are also some technical and even structural constraints. The first is directly related to the computer configuration, since it demands for a computer with graphics card and processing capacity, as well as internet broadband, which can discourage and restrict general access to all people. In

addition to these constraints there is a condition which, according to David Kirkpatrick [10], only one person on six, keep on going to the virtual world after the first month.

2.2 The case of the use of virtual worlds in teaching religion

After several months of research we can only indicate a scientific study that was developed within the same theme [11]. At the same time it is possible to indicate some academic work that is being implemented on the ground, but that deals with the issue of virtual worlds and religion, apart from the educational issue. So, we can conclude that this area has been poorly investigated and this may be so because these are two issues that generally can be considered opposed. However, if we look at the issue of religious education as part of history and world culture, it is easy to see that the SL can and should be used in this context, and can be perfectly adaptable.

The work done by Helen Farley [11] is the only one that comes closer to our study. This project was originally conceived in 2007 and it consists of a Second Life island that has a number of religious buildings, used to understand the eastern and western spiritual experience and to make an introduction to World Religions. Traditionally, content has been delivered via a tutorial and lecture program, supplemented by assessment that necessitates field trips to religious spaces situated in South East Queensland, in order to observe and investigate religious practice. As shown, the study [11] presents encouraging results, showing that there is a large amount of thematic material to be explored.

Comparing with our project, we can obtain some differences between those two studies. The project [11] has two interesting areas. First they want to understand the eastern and western spiritual experience (practical approach) and second, to make an introduction to World Religions (theoretical approach). Based on this we then decided to conduct the present case study. But in our project we just make an introduction to some (five greatest) world religions, that consist on the theoretical approach. We also cannot ignore the reduced investigation on this topic, both nationally and internationally, addressing even a higher relevance to these studies.

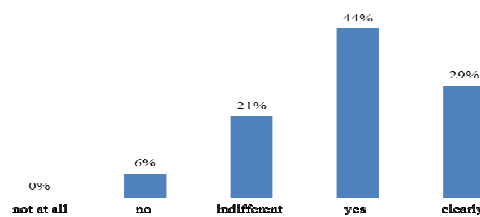
3 The case study

After examining the use of virtual worlds in education and an explanation of the various capabilities of Second Life for teaching, it was decided to conduct a research project. Therefore, as a way to achieve our goals, we performed a case study on four groups of different years (2 groups in the 9th grade (15 years old), a group in the 10th grade (16 years old), a group belonging to the 11th grade (17 years old), who were enrolled in the course of Moral Education and Catholic Religious (EMRC) in a Portuguese public school.

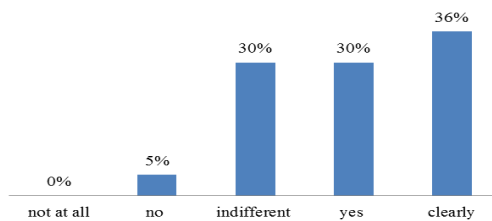
On the first lesson, we considered important to know better the students that would collaborate with us in this study. So it was decided to carry out a first investigation on some issues related to the discipline of EMRC, Computers, ICT and SL/Virtual Worlds.

On the second lesson we explaining the basic movements of navigation in SL, using a video made in SL. Then the students have been practice some of these exercises. Then we created small groups (3 or 4 elements), which was given a text file (note card) with the exercise they would have to perform. The results of this exercise revealed that most groups (80%) could identify the religions present in each island in the SL and that those who do not hit any location, was mainly because the lack of time to better explore that specific religious island.

On last lesson a final formative work was held, which for the 9th grade groups consisted to answer to a set of questions (on a notecard) about each one of the religions. For the older students, the task was a group work, answering to a set of questions using the SL and also they should take some virtual graphics (photographs, data, etc.) to make a presentation at the end of the class to the other colleagues. At the end of this lesson, we found that students performed the tasks with great accuracy and above all with high motivation, commitment and spirit of research. It was unanimously certified by the teachers that all students revealed to be able to complete the module, about the five major monotheistic religions, successfully in terms of knowledge. Finally all students were asked to complete a final survey, from which we extracted some results:



Graph 1 - I felt that I was to better understand the issues studied by the use of Second Life?



Graph 2 - Was I more aware of the issues studied because it was used the Second Life?

Analyzing the data in Graph 1, 73% (considering positive opinions) of students indicate that they will better understand the contents given on those classes, by using the SL. On the other hand, the data in Graph 2 show us that 66% (considering positive opinions) of students indicate that they were more focused because the subject was given in SL, yet 5% indicates that they were not focused at all. This data is also very positive for using SL in the formation context, for instance when most teachers

complain the lack of motivation and attention from their students, this platform along with rich contents, fades completely the theory out that present students are shortly interested, unmotivated and inattentive.

The opinion of teachers

After the 3 lessons, teachers were asked to answer a questionnaire about the three sessions attended. So, to this article, we just present some relevant answers given by the educators:

- Strengths and limitations of using SL in their discipline? "As a global education, the SL can be a way to explore that becomes in a planned manner but only momentarily, that is, one should not use it in a systematic and intensive way, nor exclusive; As a great potential, I see the possibility of students to do research on various subjects, with the possibility of contacting the realities (religions) next to its origin or from whom promote and publicize them. The limitations are due to the fact that students still have short familiarity and the bad quality of the Internet offered in the school. "
- What were the most interesting activities throughout the sessions? "The first time contact with the various virtual/real spaces that illustrate the contents. The possibility to talk live between all the elements inside or outside the classroom and other people that was also visiting the same island at the same time."
- Main shortcomings to this type of training activity: "Little pedagogical dissemination" of the spaces already created, and eventually an under-usage of these resources for teachers, non-availability of a specific classroom (ICT) with all the important material and necessary resources; it should be an occasional activity and not a dynamic and every day system."

3 Conclusion

With this project we can prove the usefulness and the use of virtual worlds as a potential pedagogical teaching tool. Although, since after many different studies have presented, this digital platform as having a high potential in the educational context, there are still some prejudices and even structural barriers to its use in the classroom. But as explored above, there are indeed reasons for more than evident that virtual worlds will become a reality in education.

In the case study, we can easily see that the SL potential overcomes any technical difficulties that may arise. Both in terms of motivation, commitment, and the seriousness with which students approached this project and to the level of acquisition and understanding of content, using the SL in the context of formation, as was demonstrated, it is clearly a great choice.

One identified gap was the need for more time for users in order to explore the islands visited, and the contents learned.

It was also possible to see that, although there are a lot of content available on the virtual platform used, at the level of religious education, much is yet to be done and created. Existing resources are scarce and make the users of these worlds have

enormous difficulties in deepening their knowledge of the religions studied. This is definitely a point that should be taken into account in future works. It also required the implementation of new islands, or any substantial improvement of existing ones as a way of answering to the rise of the avatars that navigate in these worlds

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