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An evaluation of the possibilities of using Second Life's EduNation in Information Literacy training

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the value of the virtual world Second Life, and the educational facilities available in EduNation within Second Life, specifically as regards their use for information literacy in Higher Education. The author identifies potential benefits and drawbacks of Second Life and EduNation, and concludes that they do have potential value.

Keywords

Information Literacy; Virtual worlds; Online learning; Teaching methods

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1. Introduction

Second Life is, according to its website, "a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents" and a "vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity" (Linden Research Inc, 2007). Some of these opportunities and experiences are described in the *Financial Times*, which provides a useful analysis (Harkin, 2006).

With the growth in the student population of "digital natives", familiar with the web, gaming and mobile devices, there is increasingly an attempt by Higher Education to engage with the technologies this audience uses and to use them for educational purposes. EduNation advertises itself as

> "…a 65,000m2 island in the Second Life virtual world with seminar, powerpoint, audio and videocast facilities. Use of the seminar facilities is **free**." (The Consultants-E, 2007)

These facilities could all be used within information literacy training, and this poses the question of how useful virtual reality might be in taking these applications into another dimension.

2. Potential benefits to Second Life and EduNation

a. Second Life and EduNation can be used anywhere in the world, and at any time. For students registered on distance learning courses, who would otherwise not get any Library training. It may also be useful for librarians to engage with groups of students they do not have a time-tabled session with.

b. Second Life offers a free introductory orientation, giving training in basic skills e.g. moving around; changing appearance; picking up objects; flying etc.

c. Second Life and EduNation provide new and interactive ways to engage with students who have grown up as digital natives and will probably offer benefits to those familiar with computer gaming.

d. There are a number of teaching technologies available within EduNation, e.g. podcasting; videocasting; a social breakout area; a seminar room; the SLoodle project[1] etc. All of these have potential uses within information literacy, especially perhaps the seminar room and social breakout area, as this would encourage online discussion of topics, search strategies, research techniques etc.

e. The facilities described above may lead to further innovations in learning and teaching. Information literacy skills, which are vital in supporting the learning process, should try to engage with these new resources and think about how to present the skills involved in searching for, using, and evaluating information within a virtual life context.

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[1] *The SLoodle project aims to combine the Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle, with Second Life. For more on this project, see Kemp and Livingstone, 2006.*

3. Potential drawbacks to Second Life and EduNation

a. Second Life's orientation only covers the basics, and does not offer any obvious help in teleporting around the world; using the facilities on offer etc. For example, at a ski centre, there are no directions on how to find the skis and there seems to be no mentor to ask. Although there is a help facility, this is rather confusing to use and is usually not contextual to the situation you are in.

b. As a digital immigrant, and not a digital native, and a non-gamer, it is not easy to learn how to build new materials.

c. Given the points above, it would probably be advisable to use Second Life only with students who are extremely comfortable and confident in using computers. This could eliminate a number of international students, widening participation students etc. who do not necessarily have these skills.

d. EduNation does offer training on how to use its facilities, but this costs $250 per session and libraries usually have little money to fund training in resources where there may not be an immediate benefit.

e. There is no mentor available, especially in EduNation, in order to answer questions within the context that they are asked, and to give help and guidance for new people in using the facilities.

4. Conclusions

Generally, I think that Second Life has a lot of potential for use with the right group of students: those who have grown up as digital natives, are informed gamers and enjoy a certain amount of self-directed learning. Although there are currently no plans for a project exploring the possibilities offered by EduNation at York University Library, there is the possibility (perhaps by applying through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) of training a small group of librarians in using the resources offered by EduNation, and then using this training to develop some library training and pilot it. I would certainly be interested in hearing from anyone interested in a project in this area and I am sure that the library community will be interested in any report that may result from such a project.

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