

## Second Life® as a virtual platform for language education

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### Abstract

*This paper would like to introduce Second Life® (SL) as a virtual platform for foreign language education. SL is a 3D virtual world accessible via the Internet. A free client programme enables its users to interact with each other through 'Avatars'. An 'avatar' is the graphical representation of a computer user representing himself/herself or alter ego. Recent literature in the field endorses SL as a particularly appropriate platform for the development of oral language proficiency in distance education, collaborative and intercultural learning contexts and vocational training. The authors in particular would like to share their experience from the ongoing European project **AVALON** for the design, testing and implementation of language teaching and learning in Second Life. Avalon (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline) is a 2 year multilateral project funded under the EU EACEA Life Long Learning Programme (LLP) and runs until December 2010. The 26 participating European partners include 10 state funded universities and 16 other public and private organisations operating in the following areas: language education, teacher training, intercultural training, language testing and certification, online education, publishing, business communication and networking, design of 3D environments and language learning in Second Life®. The project is a transversal programme which targets language learners from the Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus and Grundtvig communities. Not only does the project aim to create a platform in which these diverse learning communities can come together but it also has a particular interest in providing access to technology and language learning to learners in remote locations. The ultimate aim of the project is to create both a virtual environment and a sustainable community of practitioners and users which will outlive the project itself. Finally, this paper will provide examples of learning scenarios that have been designed and are being implemented under the project including courses for Debating and Academic English, Business English, Italian for Beginners and English for the catering industry.*

### 1. Introduction

The Avalon project is a multilateral project under Key Activity 3 of the LLP for the promotion of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) enabled learning. This project brings together a diverse group of educators who, at the time of application, were either already aware of or had direct experience of teaching and learning in virtual worlds and were firmly convinced of its potential for language education. While the main focus of this project is the exploration, experimentation, exploitation and validation of virtual worlds for foreign language education, it is well established within the virtual worlds educational community (i.e. *SLED* and *ReZed*) that virtual worlds hold potential for a multitude of educational scenarios in general [1].

As far as language education is concerned, many of us continue to be acutely aware of the fact that it is still very difficult to provide learners with language practice in authentic and meaningful contexts. Despite the fact that student mobility has increased and been facilitated over the last two decades, it is

nevertheless often the case that travel is too costly or not feasible for learners for a host of reasons and thus cannot be considered a real option [2]. In addition, travel is not *per se* any guarantee that learners will engage in the use of the target language upon arrival within the target culture (for example, English is often the most spoken language within the Erasmus community rather than the target language). And, while Tandem schemes have proved fruitful, they nevertheless rely on access to speakers of target languages and the maintenance of motivation is often a problem [3]. Finally, for those European countries that increasingly depend on distance education programmes (i.e. Norway and Sweden), ongoing research into the affordances and suitability of new distance learning platforms is clearly of particular interest. The overall aims of this project are, thus, to provide examples of best practice for language education in virtual worlds and to build a specifically designed self-sustaining virtual location which, upon completion of the project, will be open indefinitely to the wider public for educational purposes. In particular, the project aims to:

- design and trial learning scenarios;
- provide a certified teacher training course;
- facilitate access in cases where there are limited computer resources;
- promote general awareness of the potential of virtual worlds.

Finally, it is hoped that the physical and social space that is created by the project will be used as a researchable environment in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and in language pedagogy, language didactics and linguistics in general as extensive direct observation, recording and documentation of learning events is made possible.

### 1.1 Virtual worlds

Similarly to other telecollaborative tools (i.e. chat rooms, wikis, blogs, video-conferencing programmes, etc.), virtual worlds are spaces where genuine communicative acts can take place at a distance. Furthermore, virtual worlds also offer a host of unique affordances for synchronous communicative language-learning tasks which flow from the representation of self via an "avatar" and the highly immersive, interactive and participatory nature of the 3D environment [4].

### 1.2 Second Life<sup>®</sup>

Of the several existing virtual worlds, Second Life<sup>®</sup> (henceforth SL) is the most recent. It is a publicly available 3D multi-user virtual world and has been available for public access since 2003 for users over the legal age of 18. Developed by Linden Lab in the US, SL has established itself as an attractive social, entertainment and transaction space and interest from the higher education community is increasing [5]. Contrary to popular belief - and unlike some other virtual worlds -, SL is not a gaming environment though it shares many of the affordances of some of the most popular and successful gaming environments such as *World of Warcraft* for example. Indeed, many educators and material designers are being inspired by the possibility of creating tasks which generate game-like participatory patterns to foster autonomy, motivation and participation in language learners [6]. The decision to use SL as the main virtual world for the Avalon project stems principally from the fact that several project partners had already gained extensive building and highly successful teaching experience within the specific environment at the outset of the project.

### 1.3 Avalon Island

The design and building of Avalon Island was completed in the first six months of the project and is currently searchable as "Avalon learning" and open for public viewing via the search function in SL. All project members played an active role in the design of the island and share a common understanding of the intimate relationship between design of the environment and learning. Though the courses described below have been developed and run entirely under the Avalon project, some of them however initially took place on the "sister" island of *Kamimo* [7] funded in 2007 by the Norwegian University Programme as an educational space in support of life-long learning. *Kamimo* offers teachers and learners a variety of public and private, traditional and less traditional learning spaces and is still being actively used under the project. In addition, Talkademy, a SL language school already in operation and a participating member of the project [8], was used for the creation and trialling of the business English course materials.

## 2. Course design and models for learning

Virtual reality worlds render themselves in particular to socio-cultural and situated learning models [9] [10] [11]. These models maintain that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. In designing the learning scenarios and tasks, special attention was placed to those aspects of communicative language learning which are enhanced by the virtual environment [12]. Tasks were created which 1) foster the creation of community and the sharing of knowledge; 2) explore identity and cultural perceptions of self and the other; 3) involve collecting artefacts or building; 4) encourage artistic expression or representation; 5) use SL as a source of information and as a place of navigation and movement. Features of gaming and reward models for learning have also been incorporated. In addition, the various phases of learner initiation and participation were carefully designed according to recent recommendations in the research literature [13][14].

There are currently three main courses available in the project's scenario portfolio. The portfolio reflects the different language learning needs of the project's target audiences, the different partners and the long-term sustainability aims. All courses include both teacher-led discussions and group, pair work and individual tasks. All courses described here share the same general learning objectives:

- learning to use virtual worlds for language learning, both as a tool for communication and a source of information (technical competence);
- collaborating with people from other language and cultural backgrounds in an online environment towards a common goal (social and intercultural competence);
- communicating effectively with others in meaningful and authentic tasks (linguistic competence);
- acquiring new specific knowledge (i.e. content acquisition).

The courses described below are based on the first phase of the project's trialling process and will undergo modification during reiteration. The courses were created and are being used for the learning communities served by the project and as content for the teacher training course. Final versions of all courses and learning scenarios will be made publicly available upon completion of the project. As a result, all courses and learning scenarios described in this presentation are to be considered "work in progress".

### 2.1 The Debating Course/Academic English

Target audience: University students and business community members who need to develop public speaking skills and the language proficiency skills for oral presentations.

Target language: English

Language of instruction: English

Required language levels for participation: B2-C1

Duration: 6 in-world 90 minute sessions spread over 10 weeks

Format: a mix of teacher initiated activities (scheduled lesson time) and learner initiated activities outside the official course timetable.

The specific focus of the course is on the presentation of ideas in a convincing manner to a live audience by looking at issues such as language structure, text cohesion, presentation techniques etc. Students are divided into groups on the first day and randomly assigned a specific issue for debate and instructed about whether they need to prepare an argument for or against the issue up for debate. During the course the students work in groups and examine materials that are useful for the specific task. Materials, for example, include youtube videos of speeches of famous public speakers.

The concluding task consists of a public speech by each member of each group to the course audience. An anonymous voting tool/artefact is used to gauge participants' preference for or against a specific argument presented by a group and a concluding feedback session stems from there. Feedback focuses both on form and content of the arguments and is led by the course instructor with contributions from other course participants.

### 2.2 The Business English course

Target audience: University students studying Business and Economics and members of the business community.

Target language: English



Language of instruction: English

Required language levels for participation: B1-B2

Duration: 6 in-world 90 minute sessions spread over 3 weeks

Format: a mix of teacher initiated activities (scheduled lesson time) and learner initiated activities outside the official course timetable.

The specific focus of the course is to acquaint students with the business English needed to launch a new product or service onto the market. During the course students work in groups towards the creation of a group business plan. Materials include, for example, interviews with SL business residents. The concluding task is a group (power point) presentation of the business plan. Each group member presents a specific aspect of the plan. An anonymous voting tool/artefact is used to gauge participants' preference for or against a specific business plan by a group and a concluding feedback session stems from there. Feedback focuses both on form and content of the plan. In the business course feedback is delivered by the course leader and an outside "expert" who the learners only meet for the first time during their final presentation session.

### **2.3 The Italian for Beginners Course "Alzati e cammina" (Get up and walk)**

Target audience: Beginners of Italian

Target language: Italian

Language of instruction: English and Italian

Language level: No prior knowledge of Italian required; suitable for false beginners and students who fall within the A1-A2 level range.

Duration: 10 in-world 90 minute sessions spread over 10 weeks.

Format: a mix of teacher initiated activities (scheduled lesson time) and learner initiated activities outside the official course timetable.

The specific objective of this course is to present target language items at the A1/A2 level and provide learners with the opportunity for target language practice. Materials include teacher delivered content and content provided by students. This course combines learning about the environment with language use. An example of this is the "warm up" physical exercise activity where students use the imperative of verbs to instruct other avatars where or how to move. Specific pair or group activities are allocated where students are encouraged to explore SL for language and target culture content. The concluding activity of the course consists of an individual task chosen by the learner which involves doing something in the environment and using the target language to achieve this. For example, a student leads the group to a specific location on the learning island using the target language. Concluding feedback is provided by the teacher and leads into group discussion and reflection.

### **2.4 Other language learning scenarios**

Other language learning scenarios are currently being developed by participating members and other interested parties. For example, The Spanish-English catering course has been developed in collaboration with the University of Extremadura in Spain. This course is structured as a Tandem course in which students take it in turn to act out specific roles for the catering industry in the target language with fellow students from an English speaking background. A specific location for this has been built on Avalon.

## **3. Sustainability**

In the interest of long term sustainability, informal agreements are being reached with several groups of educational practitioners and institutions so that they may add content of their own to the island of Avalon subject to Avalon project validation. The project encourages ongoing working relationships with leading practitioners in the field and related projects such as the Niflar [15] and icEurope projects [16]. The Avalon ning further promotes the sharing of best practice for teaching and learning in virtual worlds within the wider educational community [17].

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