

Virtual Worlds offers a unique environment to support training. The key strength of virtual worlds are that they:

- allow users to be remote from one another
- allow tasks to be undertaken as joint activities, helping to build team building skills
- : enable the creation of immersive environments which might be too costly or impractical to use for real-life training
- enable real-life, real-time data to feed in to the scenarios
- can support "virtual" actors, enabling every user to get the same experience.

Who's Using Them?

Early adopters of virtual worlds for training have included the military and emergency services, hospitals, universities and even retailers. For instance St George's Hospital and Coventry University are using them to train paramedics and social care staff respectively, the US Department of Homeland security has used them for emergency services, and BP has used them for delivery drivers and forecourt staff.

Why Use Them?

Virtual worlds typically supplement rather than replace real-world training, and in use they can reduce costs and improve learning retention. Students are often prepared to try things or suggest things that they are too embarrassed to do in real-life, but the immersive nature of the training means that the lesson is remembered as images, sounds, people and actions, rather than just as dry text or a passively watched video.

Virtual World or Serious Game?

Care needs to be taken in differentiating virtual worlds from serious games, Serious Games are typically far more structured, focussing users on a very specific goal, and giving them a limited course of actions. The user also develops little attachment to their "avatar" - and in many cases they have no "on-screen" presence. By contrast virtual worlds are far more open and personal. An eLearning strategy may well make use of both types of simulation, teaching or testing different skills in each.



Avatar or Information Driven Scenarios

Within a training environment we are seeing virtual worlds used for a wide range of different scenarios. A useful axis is that between avatar and information driven scenarios. In the former the emphasis is on learners watching or interacting with human or computer driven avatars – using language and even building and managing relations. The latter represents exercises where procedure and knowledge are more relevant. Virtual worlds can support both.

Content Management

A key difference between serious games and virtual worlds is that the latter is more agile – tutors and developers can create, share and change scenarios more rapidly in a virtual world. Another key approach is to develop the core of a system so that its content is actually stored and managed on the web, enabling easier management and the support of multiple worlds (and web clients) from the same core system. For instance we are finding that the Medbiquitous Virtual Patient (MVP) standard offers significant potential for non-medical as well as medical users to create eLearning material for a virtual world.

And of course most virtual worlds can make use of existing audio, video and office document/presentation resources. We can also capture student performance data from the virtual world and send it back to an eLearning management system to go on the student, course or tutor record.

Moving Forward

If you think that virtual worlds could help you deliver better training for your staff then we'd be more than happy to come and present to you to give you a better understanding of what this technology can offer now, and where it might be going in the future. Please give us a call.

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