

Making Sense of Virtual Worlds and User Driven Innovation

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The virtual space of Second Life is imagined and created by its users, its residents, and hence it represents the interests and activities of the users. Second Life is a place of entertainment and social interactions, but also a freely modifiable environment that can be used in e.g. education. Second Life makes it for instance possible to learn together apart, to organize distance education without risking losing the connection to the students, to feel the presence of the students and the teachers as the avatars meet in three dimensional virtual spaces. Teachers can use Second Life to model reality or to create spaces for self-guided learning.

EduFinland is a virtual space for education. EduFinland is a network, an archipelago, a collection of islands that are run and used by Finnish educators. The archipelago currently has 16 islands which function as the virtual home of more than 30 schools, universities and other organizations that are interested in exploring the possibilities Second Life offers for education. It is clear that teachers and organizations that enter the virtual world of Second Life and start to explore its possibilities often begin by building a house, a space where they can meet. This phenomenon can be seen on EduFinland archipelago and almost everywhere in Second Life: buildings, furniture, tools, objects and things that we are familiar with from the world that exists outside Second Life. Building these familiar objects may help us grasp this new virtual world. When we see a door, whether virtual or made of wood, we know what to do with it and how to use it. Familiar objects may help us understand the potential of virtual worlds as we learn more about how to use it efficiently, but at the same time being stuck with familiar conservative thinking may prevent us from using these virtual environments to their full potential.

The concept of space is crucial in virtual worlds such as Second Life. It is within this virtual space that we meet other people, other avatars, it is in this virtual space that we interact with each other and where we move from one place to another. It is also in this virtual space that information can be published and disseminated. Yet the notion and influence of virtual space has not been extensively studied before. This research aims to correct this by studying the virtual world of Second Life as an information space. The goal of this research is to investigate different ways that information is disseminated in the virtual world of Second Life and how information may travel from one media to another (out from Second Life and possibly back in to Second Life). Results may help educators build more efficient spaces for education and companies to build more efficient spaces for marketing or for information dissemination.

Previous research has shown that because of the virtual space students feel strongly the presence of other students on e.g. lectures in Second Life (Holmberg & Huvila, 2008). The three dimensional environment may enhance the experience because of its immersive nature. It has also been found that avatars do in fact have some social capital (Huvila et al., 2010). Users often bring their existing

social capital with them to Second Life and it transfers to relationships between avatars or through avatars. And lastly, in an ongoing research it has been discovered that space does in fact have an impact on learning (forthcoming). It matters if the lectures are held in an esthetic space or a space with nothing stimulating the students. In a virtual space with no stimulating objects what so ever the avatars made their own stimulus as they didn't get it from the environment or from the virtual space. The students and their avatars talked and interrupted more than students participating in lectures in an esthetic space. These earlier studies suggest that the virtual space may have a major impact on how we behave, use and experience virtual spaces through our avatars. But the question is how can this information be used when looking at virtual three dimensional spaces as information spaces?

The virtual world of Second Life can be used as an information space in several different ways. Universities give lectures in Second Life and create spaces for self-guided learning. Companies create spaces that promote or give information about their products and services. Naturally information also spreads between avatars and even outside Second Life via blogs, tweets and news sites, but the questions is how efficient is the dissemination of information in a virtual world? This research will give answers to questions such as: how is information disseminated in Second Life? What kind of information spaces exists in Second Life? How can information dissemination and the impact of it be measured in a virtual world? The methods used will include observations but also webometric methods and methods from social network analysis to track the dissemination of information in a virtual world. This research will increase our collective knowledge about the use of virtual worlds such as Second Life as information spaces, to disseminate and promote information. The results may prove to be valuable for educators but also companies in Second Life.

References

Huvila, I., Holmberg, K., Ek, S. & Widén-Wulff, G. (2010). Social capital in Second Life. *Online Information Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 295-316.

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