

Immersive Virtual Worlds explored in Association for Learning Technology's journal

The current issue of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)'s peer-reviewed journal, *ALT-J*, is a special issue devoted to *Learning and Teaching in Immersive Virtual Worlds*. Ten articles explore different facets of immersive virtual worlds, from 3D Virtual Learning Environments to the role of music in learning and concepts such as Second Life, Active Worlds and collaborative virtual gaming worlds.

Dr Diane Carr, Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies, London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education, University of London, reviewed the special issue and explains, "This special issue of *ALT-J* will be welcomed by those conducting research in, teaching in, or teaching about virtual worlds. The authors investigate key concepts (including learning, affect and 'affordance'), reflect on practice, and consider the implications for pedagogy. The perspectives brought to bear on these issues are diverse. The collection incorporates topics (such as music) that have rarely been addressed by those working in this rapidly expanding field, and theoretical frameworks (such as psychoanalysis) that have rarely been applied."

ALT-J is part of the package of membership benefits for those who join the Association for Learning Technology http://www.alt.ac.uk/membership_join.html or is available under separate subscription at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=g906960349~tab=toc>.

Maggi Savin-Baden's article *From cognitive capability to social reform? Shifting perceptions of learning in immersive virtual worlds* will be a valuable source for those wishing to use Immersive Virtual Worlds to transform pedagogy.. She is an expert in Immersive Virtual Worlds with research interests including Problem-based Learning and Games-based Learning, Learning Spaces, Liquid Learning, and Second Life Learning. Her article is available for free download from www.educationarena.com from the 'In Focus' section.

Learning and Teaching in Immersive Virtual Worlds. A special issue of *ALT-J*.

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Edited by Maggi Savin-Baden (Professor of Higher Education Research and Director of Learning Innovation at Coventry University) and Robert Ward (Reader in Human-Computer Interaction at the University of Huddersfield)
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For the full table of contents, please visit:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=g906960349~tab=toc>

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Notes to editors:

Journalists can obtain a copy of this issue from Catherine.dhanjal@theansweruk.com or 01883 650434.

Table of contents and comments from reviewers are below:

The latest issue of the ALT Journal, Research in Learning Technology, is a Special Issue on:

Content

1. Editorial, Pages 137 - 138

Authors: Frances Bell; Maggi Savin-Baden; Robert Ward

DOI: 10.1080/09687760802614214

Link: <http://tinyurl.com/9hxua6>

2. From Multi-User Virtual Environment to 3D Virtual Learning Environment, Pages 139 - 150

Authors: Daniel Livingstone; Jeremy Kemp; Edmund Edgar

DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526707

Link: <http://tinyurl.com/85545d>

3. From cognitive capability to social reform? Shifting perceptions of learning in immersive virtual worlds, Pages 151 - 161
Author: Maggi Savin-Baden
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526731
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/7jjcmp>
4. Problem-based learning spanning real and virtual worlds: a case study in Second Life, Pages 163 - 172
Authors: Judith Good; Katherine Howland; Liz Thackray
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526681
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/82v5vr>
5. Observations of expert communicators in immersive virtual worlds: implications for synchronous discussion, Pages 173 - 180
Author: Michael Hamilton McVey
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526673
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/88dnpr>
6. Laying the groundwork for socialisation and knowledge construction within 3D virtual worlds, Pages 181 - 196
Authors: Shailey Minocha; Dave Roberts
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526699
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/9pqsuz>
7. Uncanny spaces for higher education: teaching and learning in virtual worlds, Pages 197 - 205
Author: Siân Bayne
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526749
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/97fe5m>
8. Machinima interventions: innovative approaches to immersive virtual world curriculum integration, Pages 207 - 220
Authors: Andrew John Middleton; Richard Mather
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526723
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/8zbw5u>
9. Collaborative virtual gaming worlds in higher education, Pages 221 - 229
Authors: Nicola Whitton; Paul Hollins
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526756
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/987vmr>
10. An investigation of the role of background music in IWWs for learning, Pages 231 - 244
Authors: Debbie Richards; Eric Fassbender; Ayse Bilgin; William Forde Thompson
DOI: 10.1080/09687760802526715
Link: <http://tinyurl.com/7v4ha3>

Quotes and support for the Special Issue from leading specialists in the field:

Professor Philip Barker, National Teaching Fellow, FBCS, FRSA, School of Computing, University of Teesside, Middlesbrough, TS1 3BA, UK.

If anyone doubts the merit or scope of research in this area, they should glance at the papers that have just been published in our most recent issue - one that is devoted to immersive virtual learning environments.

Dr Christine Sinclair, Lecturer in Academic Practice, University of Strathclyde.

This special issue of ALT-J comes at a good time for those of us who have ventured into Immersive Virtual Worlds (IVWs) but are not too sure what to do when we get there. There are explanations for our uncertainties about these “uncanny” spaces (Bayne) which affect not just what we do, but how we present and conduct ourselves (McVey) and how we get on with others (Minocha and Roberts). Some of the things we do in “real life” have counterparts in these IVWs, though they are rather different, resulting in hybrid activities – thus we can solve problems and watch films within virtual worlds (Good et al; Middleton and Mather) requiring the new concept of “machinima”; we can use Moodle in Second Life (Daniel Livingstone’s Sloodle). And these hybrids yield new insights: Fassbinder et al are finding that background music in IVWs support memory and learning. So we’re no longer just playing games in IVWs – or if we are, when we’re supposed to be learning, they must be based on sound pedagogical principles (Whitton and Hollins). There is a sense throughout all these papers of increasing maturity – an evolution with respect to academic use of these technologies. The pioneers are able to show the novices what’s possible – and this has gone beyond the dreams of the designers. But we’ll change ourselves in the process (Savin-Baden): the nature of learning and even universities will look very different as a result.

Dr Lesley Gourlay, Lecturer in Higher Education at the King's Learning Institute, King's College, London

This set of studies draws together and significantly extends the scope of scholarship surrounding applications of immersive virtual worlds to higher education. The collection explores aspects of the topic from a variety of theoretical and methodological standpoints, providing the reader with a series of lenses through which to view this complex set of contexts and emergent practices. Pedagogic affordances are discussed, such as in Shailey Minocha and Dave Roberts’ paper which argues for the potential of these worlds to enable distance learning participants to ‘know one another’ via visual presence and proximity. Fine-grained ethnographic accounts of student experiences and identity work are also analysed, as in Siân Bayne’s paper which connects student experiences of virtual worlds to the theory of ‘the uncanny’, being, and notions of troublesomeness and liminality. In doing so, she discusses the destabilising strangeness associated with the self, animation and virtual worlds, concluding that these spaces may enable a wider pedagogy based on radical uncertainty. The social context is also considered, such as in Maggi Savin-Baden’s paper which arguing for a ‘social reform’ perspective on immersive virtual worlds, as opposed to an asocial, linear cognitive conception of learning. This special issue provides the field with much-needed theoretical depth and contestation in an area which has arguably been dominated by a technological focus and uncritical assumptions surrounding the lived experience of learners and teachers in immersive virtual worlds.

Dr Diane Carr Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies, London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education, University of London

This special issue will be welcomed by those conducting research in, teaching in, or teaching about virtual worlds. The authors investigate key concepts (including learning, affect and ‘affordance’), reflect on practice, and consider the implications for pedagogy. The perspectives brought to bear on these issues are diverse. The collection incorporates topics (such as music) that have rarely been addressed by those working in this rapidly expanding field, and theoretical frameworks (such as psychoanalysis) that have rarely been applied.

Dr Andrew Sithers, Academic Manager, Microsoft Ltd

With Sony’s Home project launching and giving 3D virtual environments a new lease of life in the living rooms of thousands of games players, this special edition of ALT-J could not come at a better time.

As we drive learners from being passive consumers of information to fully immersed learners, the variety of tools at our disposal has never been so great. From simple chat based communication to emotive avatar-based interaction, we are still a long way from fully understanding the range of psychological and pedagogical issues that face learners and educators when using 3D Virtual Learning Environments (3DVLs).

The papers presented focus on the quality and realism of the immersive experience - from in-world ambience to real-time communication, and the opportunities afforded to education. The subtle psychology and psycho-social aspects of a 3DVL are explored (Bayne; Fassbender et al.; Savin-Baden), but the real focus is on implementation (Livingstone et al.) and enhancing learning in a 3DVL (McVey; Minocha & Roberts; Good et al.).

Despite the forward looking work presented, perhaps the most reassuring paper is from Whitton & Hollins, who provide an evolution over revolution perspective on the 3DVL phenomena. In times of acute information overload, being shown how new technology builds on that which is familiar is wonderfully comforting.

Clive Shepherd, Chair of the eLearning Network, <http://www.elearningnetwork.org>

As someone whose primary interest is in workplace learning, I approached this collection of papers on virtual worlds with some scepticism. It's not that I'm not personally interested in the subject, it's just that leading-edge and somewhat exotic sounding technologies are difficult to sell at the best of times, and particularly as we enter one of the most frightening downturns of my lifetime.

As learning and development budgets are slashed, we have to have a pretty convincing argument for using virtual worlds. Why use new technology for simulation, when we can have our trainees practise in the real-world? Why use a 3D environment for live collaboration when we seem to be managing well with web conferencing? These are not easy questions to answer and so I am pleased to report that these papers provide quite a bit of help. The focus may be education rather than workplace learning, but many of the conclusions are generic.

Bayne attempts to get to the bottom of what the user experience of immersion in a virtual world is really like, a critical issue if we are to persuade teachers away from 2D alternatives. Good, Howland and Thackray demonstrate how simulations can become social problem-solving experiences, while Minocha and Roberts emphasise the importance of socialisation into virtual worlds. They acknowledge that avatars do not provide as realistic a depiction as, say, video conferencing, but do provide a feeling of physical presence in the same space.

This capability can only be enhanced as avatars become more expressive in terms of their virtual body language.

I was pleased to see that Whitton and Hollins emphasised the huge difference between collaborative activities in low-cost environments such as SecondLife, and the photo-realistic simulations used by the military and in medicine - the latter might represent expensive interventions, but they can be justified in terms of the risks they mitigate and, as Savin-Baden points out, the opportunities they provide to expose learners to a much wider range of scenarios than they would be likely to meet in a face-to-face programme.

Finally, Middleton and Mather summarise very nicely for me what virtual worlds could provide within the context of workplace learning - their social, immersive qualities and an accessible simulation technology. Sceptical finance directors will take some convincing, but we can be more confident in our pitch knowing that there are some real benefits to be obtained, not just solutions looking for problems.

About ALT

ALT (the Association for Learning Technology) is a professional and scholarly association which brings together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology. There are over 200 organisational members from higher and further education institutions, private and public sector organisations and over 500 individual members. Sponsoring members include Becta, HEFCE, Microsoft, the Scottish Funding Council, Adobe, and the Learning and Skills Council.

ALT organises a yearly high profile conference – ALT-C, the theme for ALT-C 2009 will be *In dreams begins responsibility: choices, evidence, and change*. The conference takes place from 8-10 September 2009, Manchester, UK. <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2009/>

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