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3-D Collaboration

Three-Dimensional Learning Environments Are More Immersive and Engaging

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Most collaborative tools today can help rather than hinder the social interactions inherent in collaboration. These often browser-based interfaces have become more standardized and intuitive, requiring little or no training. They support multiplemedia (audio, video and data), are becoming less expensive (or in many cases free), and can integrate with a wide variety of content and object types (email, multi-media, avatars, Web pages, mashups of public and private data, etc.). Collaboration today has also expanded into hundreds of 3-D environments like Second Life, 3D Explorer and Wonderland.

WHAT IS 3-D?

3-D virtual worlds are environments where an avatar can navigate in all three dimensions. There are many examples, including 3DXplorer, Second Life, Everquest and World of Warcraft. The 3-D environment is unique because you can move your avatar in this immersive space just as if you were there. In a 3-D virtual world, each avatar can go in different rooms at the same time. In the same room, one can look at the ceiling, another closely at the windows, and the third at the papers on the desk. Your ability to move and have the scene you see through a window change heightens your sense of presence. 3-D environments have the potential to be a more engaging environment due to the visual impact, freedom of movement, and the use of an avatar. In these environments, you can walk into buildings, then into rooms: you are free to move about. These can be fun or serious places. Unlike a game, 98 percent of Second Life has been built by the residents. Some have built shops, other areas for educational events and other places for play.

What could the future hold for virtual reality? An article titled "Virtual Reality Embraces the Five Senses" describes the first virtual reality headset that can stimulate all five senses. Of the five senses, only two are digitalized—visual and sound— but researchers are working to bring the others to us.

3-D VERSUS 2-D

We come to virtual worlds for visual impact, heightened engagement, and situations where we can practice real-life actions without real-life consequences. They can be a conference call on steroids, or they can move your marine biology class into a harbor — without the travel, scuba gear or real-world risks. Next week, another group will use the same virtual harbor to simulate an oil spill for 10 different groups of trainees. However, just as a hammer is not the correct tool for every situation, the 3-D virtual environment is not the correct tool for every situation.

I was working on a project for a non-profit and had a project team meeting in Qwaq (now called Teleplace). Because it is a collaborative environment, we all had avatars, and looked at shared documents on the wall (Gantt chart for the project). We also had VoIP so everyone could hear each other. The goal of the meeting was to get people to buy into the project plan, and assign tasks to resources.

This meeting was accomplished however, by just doing simple screen sharing. If we had been working on a CAD model and needed to rotate it as an object and see it in 3-D then an environment like Teleplace or Second Life might be more helpful.

3-D VERSUS F-2-F

Most 3-D environments have limited expressions and gestures from avatars. Doing these things,

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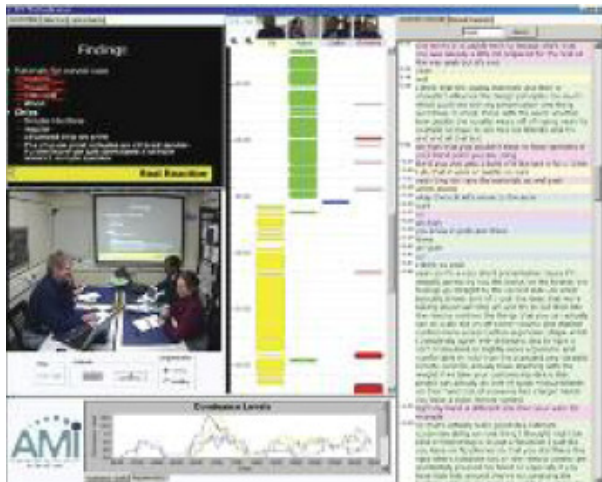
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metadata in a database. It is a Java-based architecture supporting a variety of plug-ins (29 currently).

The JFerret browser combines the appropriate metadata and raw data in a unified view on the user's screen. As you can see from Fig. 2, those in the meeting are getting a lot more data about the others in the meeting (local or remote) than they would if they were just in a F-2-F meeting. It is this kind of augmented environment that I believe meetings in 3-D spaces will evolve to.



3-D COLLABORATION CHALLENGES

It is true that you probably get a better sense of the person in a 3-D environment, but the overhead of a 3-D environment might prevent a proliferation of 3-D project spaces. At this point in time, you not only need to learn the 3-D environment, but you also need to have a powerful enough computer (graphics card with lots of memory) to be effective. Either or both of these issues can create an impediment for moving projects from 2-D to 3-D.

The first challenge is to understand 3-D environments as one part of a global shift to a digital culture. Focus on the benefits before evaluating the risks. John Jamison, founder of Imagi learning, "...sees virtual worlds as representing a profound change that is taking place in our global culture ... a flattening of access to each other, a restructuring of authority and expertise ... all done in an immersive environment that creates a level of intimacy surpassing any other communication technology." Spend time in virtual worlds before taking your events "in-world," and use a staged approach. This allows you to learn as you implement each stage.

The second challenge is the technology to get you into the 3-D environment. Businesses, governments and educators considering the use of virtual worlds will need to discuss this with IT specialists, who will be concerned with security, platform updates (and associated issues), stability, and possible hardware upgrades.

The third challenge is the learning curve to operate the new tool. Users you bring there need to learn how to log in, obtain an avatar, move, chat, talk, view information and get places. These are the "how" questions: not difficult information, but it takes some time.

The fourth challenge is answering more important "why" questions. Why is this 3-D environment better than a 2-D environment for his situation? Just because you can walk into a harbor with 20 students and discuss marine biology or an oil spill response does not automatically make it better than a Web-based presentation combined with a conference call.

Virtual 3-D environment can improve performance and improve ROI on selected projects, but see them as a one of a variety of new tools in your digital-age toolbox. The final question is to compare the costs of an activity in this 3-D environment with the benefits you gain in this application.

SUMMARY

It is still early in the development of 3-D collaborative environments, and although they are more immersive, they don't take the place of an F-2-F meeting. Sometimes 2-D is the best choice, but if your project, problem or challenge is in training, simulation or entertainment, a 3-D environment might be the right choice. There are lots of 3-D tools available, including: Doppleganger; Kaneva; Meez, Active Worlds; Coke Studios; Club Penguin; Cybertown; Disney's Toontown; Dreamville; Dubit; Habbo Hotel; The Manor; Mokitown; Moove; Muse; The Palace; Playdo; The Sims Online; Sora City; There; TowerChat; Traveler; Virtual Ibiza; Virtual Magic Kingdom; Voodoo Chat; VPchat; VZones; whyrobberocks; Whyville; Worlds.com Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates; Gaia Online.

Using a 3-D collaborative environment frees you up to turn off gravity, fly, change your clothes, your avatar, match your clothes and your avatar to a new environment, and use a simulation for medical training. These environments are often only limited by your creativity and imagination. They don't have to be expensive, and many of them are free or very low cost to try. We invite you to spend time in these environments and find out what tools, processes and avatars fit you, and how the 3-D environment can help solve some of your current collaboration challenges.



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