VIEWS OF STUDENTS ABOUT THE USE OF SECOND LIFE FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs) such as Second Life (SL) are experiencing a rapid growth in the number of applications with educational potential. SL provides a space for constructivist learning, socialization, exploration, discovery, and creativity. The communicative, social nature of virtual learning allows students to demonstrate the skills and strategies they have acquired through utilization of social technology tools.

This study investigates higher education students’ perceptions and experiences about Second Life in Educational Software Course at a Turkish State University. The aim of the study is to determine the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of students about use of this virtual environment for educational purposes. The research involved in-depth interviews with fifteen students using a semi-structured interview format. The findings represent student perceptions from a sufficiently diverse range of education faculty and educational software course.

Keywords: Second Life (SL), Virtual World, Problem-Based Learning, Learner Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Multi-user virtual environments are 3-D environments that support exploration, simulation, role-play, interaction and experimentation via avatars, or 3-D self-representations (Burgess, Slate, Rojas-eeBouef and Laprairie, 2010). One type of 3-D environment is virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are characterized by a shared social space, a graphical user interface, real-time interaction, user-generated content, persistence, and active support for in-world social groups (Book, 2004).

Second Life (SL) is “a 3D online persistent space totally created and evolved by its users. Within this vast and rapidly expanding place, you can do, create or become just about anything you can imagine” (http://secondlife.com/whatis). Second Life is synthetic environment in which users take on the form of an avatar, a representation of the user, and then interact with other users. SL could potentially provide safe environments whereby students could learn by doing (Meadows, 2008). The three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life (SL), which launched in 2003, has increasingly been used by educators to teach students, conduct class, and to explore the unique opportunities virtual worlds may present for teaching and learning (Meadows, 2008).
A wide variety of well-known educational institutions are using SL for a range of purposes, including distance education, presentations and meetings, historical recreations, literature and language acquisition (Minocha and Reeves, 2010). Second Life has been used and studied in both traditional classroom and distance learning (Zhang, 2010). Holmberg and Huvila (2008) suggest that using virtual worlds and the interreality they create may be an advantage in distance education if it can bring distance education closer to face–to–face education.

The main features of Second Life are as follows;

- Identity selection: Countless avatar customizations allow e-learners to change their avatar’s appearance to look any way they choose.
- Communication options: E-learners can communicate in a variety of ways including typed chat, private instant messaging, and voice chat. In addition, they can convey their non-verbal expressions via the pre-programmed animations such as laughing, crying, dancing and others.
- A realistic environment: Dynamic lighting and shadowing, a complete weather system, and up-loadable textures and audio all add to e-learners real world experience (Mansour, Bennett and Rude-Parkins, 2008).
- Students in a virtual world can actively create their own projects as three-dimensional environments without any restriction.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study has two stages consisting of student experiences in the virtual world and their opinions about this environment in terms of its use for education purposes.

The first stage is based on students’ experiences during the process of constructing the educational environment they desire and on the outcomes of the process. Participant of this study are fifteen students (eight male and seven female) ranging from third to fourth year. They took Educational Software Course at 2010-2011 Fall Semesters. Objective of the course is to develop and evaluate an educational environment.

Student studied collaboratively with other team members. They have voluntarily created 3 groups. Each of the groups is consist of 5 students. They selected to build an educational environment in Second Life (SL). Project groups chose the subject which they want to study on. Students were helped with tutorials, video links and online training session to start their exploration in Second Life. Each project group aims to develop problem-based learning (PBL) scenarios in Second Life (SL). Each student works in groups to explore their problem, identify the information lacking, and develop appropriate skills as required. Group 1 built their dream university campus. Group 2 built a house for people with disabilities. Group 3 built an environment in which people can learn tennis and swimming styles (Kobak, 2011).

This study (second stage) investigates higher education students’ perceptions and experiences about Second Life in Educational Software Course at a Turkish State University. The aim of the study is to determine the views of students about use of this virtual environment for educational purposes.

These are the questions that the research set out to explore:

- How students evaluate the Second Life as a resident of virtual world?
- How students evaluate the Second Life as a higher education student?
- How students evaluate the Second Life as teacher candidates?
METHOD

This is a descriptive study aimed at exploring students’ assessments of Second Life as residents, students and teachers. Among third- and fourth-grade students studying Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching, a total of 15 voluntary students (seven female and eight male) who took the Educational Software Course at a Turkish State University participated in the research.

Data Collection

The research involved in-depth interviews with these groups using a semi-structured interview format. There is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts in semi-structured interview. The format is open-ended and interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner. The interviewer will ask the same questions of all of the participants, although not necessarily in the same order or wording (Dörnyei, 2007). The interview form was sent to two experts for content and face validity, and in line with experts’ opinions, it was given its final form. All the interviews were made by the researchers.

Interviews were audio-taped with the permissions of participants and transcribed to provide the data. The transcriptions were analyzed using descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis is about the written data, including the extracted themes, the nature of those themes, and possible interrelationships between the themes. These themes are explained and interpreted. Cause-and-effect relationships were examined and conclusions reached (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006).

RESULTS

Evaluation of Second Life

Since the participant students had not have previous experience on Second Life, at the first stage of the research, they were given information about the use and basic elements of Second Life. After the applied training given in virtual world, students were asked to explore and live in the world. Determination of students’ first experiences in Second Life is of importance to reveal their perceptions of the world.

The most important findings of the research are as follows: eight students declared that they like SL. In addition they said, SL was an enjoyable lifelike environment, and they highlighted the opportunities of communication and interaction.

Students reported that they liked this environment for the following reasons: the virtual world is close to the real one and everything doable in the real life is also possible there, it offers a visually rich environment, possibility of doing what is not possible in the real life such as dancing, flying or teleportation, and it involves entertaining activities.

Students stated that they felt uncomfortable mostly with sexually explicit messages in Second Life and this is why they limited their communication to their classmates. Students underlined that the use of Second Life without another person’s assistance or guidance was difficult. They asked for help mostly from foreigners, and they communicated with these people with the help of Google Translate. There exist students in the research who had negative opinions about SL. The negative opinions presented were; avatars were not animated and there were problems stemmed from not having SL money (Linden Dollar). In addition, they perceived the slow loading rate of images to be a rupture to the sense of reality.
Problems

Students pointed that they had some problems during their SL experiences. It is possible to categorize these problems as technical and social problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Problems</th>
<th>Social Problems</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High speed internet connection</td>
<td>Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low capacity hardware</td>
<td>Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Sexual content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication problems due to loss of voice</td>
<td>Money</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Addiction</td>
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</table>

Many students experienced technical problems in SL. There are students who think negatively of SL due to low internet speed and hardware problems. These students, however, believe that SL could be an education and communication environment if these technical problems were solved.

Students think that new SL users must be trained about how to use SL. Many students exhibited anxiety about having communication problems with foreigners due to their inadequate command of foreign language. Students, who view SL as a sexually explicit environment, suggest that the island where applications will be performed should be closed to such activities. There are other students who think that SL would cause addiction since it is free of charge.

Use of Second Life for Education Purposes

Students were asked to evaluate SL as students and as future teachers. Two groups emerged out of the interviews: those who see SL as an educational environment and those who think that SL cannot be an educational environment.

Positive Opinions

Students suggested building campuses which contains seminars, conferences and interactive videos for more effective educational environment in SL. Especially the facts that SL involves visual and audio elements and that there is no need to create a new infrastructure are two of the points advocated by students who were positive about SL. These people also reported that SL could help users improve their foreign language skills. SL was also qualified as an alternative educational environment different from standard education understanding. One of the students stated that people who do not want to reveal their faces might easily join the educational environment by personalizing avatars.

There were also participants who expressed opinions about the use of SL in distance learning. One of the students stated: "...but I think these environments are not well-developed, or I did not notice at least. In universities I visit, mostly there were promotion presentations, but I have not seen online seminars or conferences. SL is a good environment for these opportunities. For example, there is this Faculty of Open University, which has students from all over Turkey.

They cannot go and see the university nor can they interact with their classmates. However, if we establish the Open University Campus here, these students can be given education and have the opportunities I have stated above. For example, I would like to take my Accounting course in SL..." Participants stated that those who use SL for educational purposes should not be fascinated by games. Students, if they were supposed to teach, stated that they would design courses in a way to attract students. They also reported that they would do evaluation in the Q&A or applied form.
A student stated that theoretical courses cannot be taught in SL, but practical courses can. In addition, students emphasized the fact that technical problems must be eliminated before offering education in this environment.

**Negative Opinions**

Students, who argued that SL cannot be regarded as an educational environment and no education can be received here, presented the following reasons: it involves distracting entertainment elements and there are problems in loading of educational materials. Other reasons expressed were the dominance of sexually explicit elements and the impossibility to develop anything without financial support. They argued that the educational environment cannot be established without eliminating technical problems.

**Developing Educational Software in Second Life**

Interviewees reported that they experienced problems in loading educational software in SL. One of the students, for example, expressed the problem as follows: "...We shot a video, but it was extremely difficult, we could not adjust camera angles. Even after we managed to adjust, we could not merge. Then, we shot the video in captivate. We had problems, then we took pictures and put them in moviemaker. We were going to make it using the Flash software but we learned that we could not upload it to SL and that we could upload only YouTube link...". Another interviewee stated that a very simple thing is done in Movie maker and thus education cannot entirely be given in SL. Most students suggested that interactive videos should be uploaded and these materials should always stay there.

**SUGGESTIONS**

Our study captures students’ perceptions, opinions and attitudes. It is believed that the findings of this research will be beneficial to students and academics who wish to study Second Life. But relatively small sample was used that potentially limits generalizability. The findings, however, represent student perceptions from a sufficiently diverse range of education faculty and educational software course. Thus, these exploratory findings represent a broad view of the issues that arise. Also, the research was conducted at a single university, so conducting similar research across a number of universities would make the findings more generalizable.

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