3D Virtual Worlds for Language Learning
a guide for teachers

How to use 3D Virtual Environments in Language Lessons
3D virtual worlds offer us places to meet others, spaces to create our own reality and locations for us to simply exist in. Language learners can draw on these social, immersive and creative experiences to practice and improve language skills.

What is it? And how is it normally used?
A 3D virtual world looks and feels like an online computer game. However, virtual worlds such as Second Life are fundamentally different from games, because there are no specific tasks to complete and the aim is not to compete with other players. Instead, a virtual world is simply a 3D social space. It allows us to meet others around the world in an established online environment. Second Life is probably the best known 3D virtual world, but it is not the only one. Some other virtual environments that you may have heard of include There.com, Twinity and Exit Reality. Generally virtual worlds are relaxed environments where anyone can go to socialize. However, many businesses and countless educational institutions are using virtual worlds for private meetings, classes and public events.

Why would we be interested?

• Social learning: students can meet others, whether fellow students from their own institution or students at a partner institute or simply native speakers of their target language. Both specific tasks and general conversation practice are available in a relaxed environment.

• Immersive learning: 3D virtual environments allow students to really be somewhere. Students can easily (virtually) visit real locations or explore imaginary places. This allows us to add reality to specific tasks by including the physical interaction with the location as part of the language task, yet it avoids being bound by the logistics of arranging visits.

• Creativity: some virtual worlds (especially Second Life) allow users to build objects (real or imaginary) in a cheap and easy way. Students can create and decorate their own virtual home, customize their avatar’s appearance and create virtual vehicles. There are therefore opportunities for students to role play within a specific context and to collaborate with other students in building tasks.

• Relevance: for many students virtual worlds seem normal places to be. Virtual meetings or presentations are different from their real life equivalents and so students will benefit from practicing 21st Century skills within a 3D virtual environment.

How can we use it for language learning?
Virtual worlds lend themselves to location-specific and socially interactive learning opportunities. Below are some suggested activities.

I. Virtual Field Trips: students can visit places to see what they look like. Second Life has many islands that are replicas of real life cities (see www.avatarlanguages.com/freepractice for some examples). Explorative activities allow students to make the trips their own by choosing their own locations. Students can also be invited to comment on what they see and do – perhaps considering whether they
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would like to visit the place in real life and in which circumstances. As the field trips are online students can look up information (in another browser window) while they are virtually located somewhere. It is also highly flexible, because the field trip can be paused and restarted at any time (a little difficult on a real life field trip).

II. **Virtual City Tours**: students can research a location and give a city tour, acting as a tour guide to others who are new to the area. This can be combined with preparatory tasks to research the location and follow up tasks to document or reflect upon the experience (with recordings, screenshots etc). Students could also give each other directions to direct one another around a location – perhaps a replica of a city.

III. **Combining with real life websites**: virtual worlds offer the possibility of exploring a 3D environment while using the conventional 2D web to research relevant web pages. This could be to understand more about a real location; or to find information to solve a puzzle or quest; or perhaps draw upon everyday information (eg timetables or prices) to incorporate into a 3D role play. Exit Reality takes this a step further by allowing users to ‘surf’ websites with a 3D avatar. Although it is especially intended for creating 3D versions of Facebook pages to share with other avatars (see Exit Reality – 3D Virtual Experiences for Everyone) it also allows avatars to wonder around conventional websites, where the images are placed in picture frames, the videos in television sets and the text in wall panels.

IV. **SurReal Quests**: students can use virtual worlds to socialize with others and practice their language skills. Students can use Second Life to interview others on a research topic of their choice. Virtual worlds allow students to meet with others in a way that is more convenient than real life and perhaps less stressful for more self-conscious students. Some topics may well be related to specific locations that can be visited in a virtual world (eg London or the space museum in Second Life) so that the interviewees are more likely to be interested in the topic.

V. **Presentations and meetings**: virtual worlds are increasingly being used for business meetings, classes and conferences. Students can prepare for these situations within a 3D virtual world. Virtual world meetings often include text-chatting parallel to the voice communication and so represent a different set of skills from conventional presentation giving. Students can practice balancing the different communication flows alongside the delivery of their presentations.

VI. **Role plays**: avatars are easily modified and can be changed to place the student in a specific role. Such role plays allow students to experience a culture, historic period or social role more fully. This could perhaps lead to more reflective discussions and tasks as follow up activities. Specific tasks, such as shopping or going to a restaurant, can be acted out with props and physical movement or gestures.

VII. **Creative Constructions**: students can create their own constructions such as a homes, clothing or landscapes. As a collaborative task this construction work can be language intensive and involve many opportunities to negotiate meaning with other students.

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Pedagogies for 3D Virtual Worlds

- **Dogme**: the social and immersive qualities of virtual world language learning make Dogme an appropriate pedagogy to draw on. Dogme draws on the ideas, reactions, impressions and conversations of the students as the material for the class. Virtual worlds offer opportunities to stimulate the learners and to allow them to converse with others within the virtual world. See the blog post on Dogme for Virtual Worlds for a further discussion.

- **Task-based Learning**: Google Street View is extremely practical for everyday use and so it naturally lends itself to a TBL approach. Information gap situations can be created where one student is guiding another (each with separate computers). Street View can also add an immersive component to other tasks.

Practicalities

Second Life, as with many other 3D virtual environments) has an internal economy based on its own currency. This allows for virtual items (land, buildings, decorations and clothing) to be exchanged and paid for, albeit at very low prices. Land in Second Life can be used in a variety of ways; in some respects the issue of land ownership plays a key role in this.

- **Private Spaces**: are locations that are owned by a specific person or institution, who decides who can have access to the land at any given time. Using one’s own space permits much greater control over what happens and who is present. It allows the educator to have specific (perhaps custom made) themes, activities and content. Students can also construct and modify the location if they are given the appropriate rights to change the properties of objects.

- **Public Spaces**: are areas where any avatar is free to wander. This may be because the land is owned by the virtual world itself or because the private owner has given access to all. Publicly accessible spaces allow more social experiences than if the activity takes place on privately owned islands. However, publicly held activities are less easy to control because other users can interrupt the lesson. Depending on the activity (and the nature of the disturbances), these interruptions could be drawn upon as language learning opportunities in themselves.

- **Public and Private Combinations**: can be achieved by teleporting (moving) between locations (it only takes a few seconds). This allows students to meet others and expand their social activities to include those beyond their fellow students. This approach gives the students access to a wider range of environments. Specific activities can be carried out on the educator’s privately owned land. This would be appropriate for building activities or when interruptions from non-students would be overly disruptive.

Further Information

- Avatar Languages blog post about 3D virtual worlds in language learning.
- The SLanguages conference for virtual world language learning.
- EduCause information on Second Life in education.