Chapter 33
Language Teaching in 3D Virtual Worlds With Machinima:
Reflecting on an Online Machinima Teacher Training Course

Michael Thomas
University of Central Lancashire, UK

Christel Schneider
CSiTrain, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article is based on findings arising from a large, two-year EU project entitled "Creating Machinima to Enhance Online Language Learning and Teaching" (CAMELOT), which was the first to investigate the potential of machinima, a form of virtual filmmaking that uses screen captures to record activity in immersive 3D environments, for language teaching. The article examines interaction in two particular phases of the project: facilitator-novice teacher interaction in an online teacher training course which took place in Second Life and teachers' field-testing of machinima which arose from it. Examining qualitative data from interviews and screen recordings following two iterations of a 6-week online teacher training course which was designed to train novice teachers how to produce machinima and the evaluation of the field-testing, the article highlights the pitfalls teachers encountered and reinforces the argument that creating opportunities for pedagogical purposes in virtual worlds implies that teachers need to change their perspectives to take advantage of the affordances offered.

1. INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the European Commission (EC) funded CAMELOT project (Creating Machinima to Enhance Online Language Learning and Teaching) (2013-2015), this paper discusses findings arising from two iterations of an online teacher training course that was designed to facilitate the production and field-testing of machinima and therefore to investigate its potential as a digital tool in foreign language education. The

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8179-6.ch033

study includes analysis of participant reflections as they completed the course and maps participants' initial assessment of their machinima production skills against their end of course achievements.

A primary focus of the CAMELOT project was to raise the profile of machinima in education and language education in particular and to help to define it in ways that could aid meaningful adoption. Whereas Harwood and Uwins (2015) distinguish between machinima that derive from gameplay, artistic media and those that are produced to support teaching and learning related activities, Johnson and Pettit (2012, p. 32) describe machinima in terms of a creative process, as a "craft and art form". The neologism 'machinima' used in the context of this paper focuses on the creation of short videos that can be used for pedagogical purposes (Marino, 2004). As identified by Ng and Barrett (2013) and Middleton and Mather (2008), the production process of machinima uses similar techniques to those involved in the creation of real-world films. This includes the design, storyboarding, assigning of different roles and responsibilities within a production team (e.g. director, editor, actors and camera operators), as well as the use of venues, props and special effects (Snelson, 2010). Consequently, when involved in tasks and projects utilising machinima, this form of digital storytelling may enable language learners to develop what Gee calls "collaborative literacy" (2012, p. 38) and to use the target language in the process of creating user-generated content.

As the history of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) often makes clear, however, while technologies such as machinima hold potential for language learning, the pre-requisite for effective implementation of new pedagogical approaches is often effective teacher training; thus this is the main focus of this paper. Before turning to examine the findings from the CAMELOT teacher training course in more detail, the first section of the paper provides background and context for the paper with respect to relevant research in the field of 3D immersive environments and education.

2. REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

3D Virtual learning environments are multi-user spaces that offer teachers and learners new ways of interacting and collaborating (Bell, 2009). When utilised in a pedagogical context, virtual environments such as Second Life (SL) or OpenSim (OS) can serve as an inspiring educational learning space for creating formal and informal learning (Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012). Compared with other 3D virtual environments, Warburton (2009) considers SL as the most popular, even though the number of users has declined in recent years and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), such as *World of Warcraft* have emerged as popular alternatives. In this context, the creation of machinima – or short user-generated video recordings of on-screen content from the virtual world or game – have become very popular.

According to Ng (2016), machinima are highly diverse and can include news, reviews, gameplay videos, gaming tips and tricks, story-telling, and drama. In the context of this paper, 3D virtual worlds (VWs) are defined in a more formal, structured way, as participants typically arrange to meet at a specific time and location in order to take part in planned educational events (Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012). 3D VWs provide teachers and learners with a variety of opportunities to experience and experiment with their creative skills and develop responsibility for their own learning process (Ferguson, 2011). Furthermore, VWs allow learners to attempt and complete tasks that may have been impossible or too dangerous to achieve in non-virtual environments (Falconer, 2014).