

## Chapter 21

# Inspiring Personal and Social Transformation through Avatar Role Play in an Online Immersive Virtual Environment

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the use of educational role play in the online immersive virtual environment (IVE) as a means of social and personal transformation aimed toward positive outcomes in social and cultural sensitivity online and in the real world. Characteristics of the IVE online, its parallels to real life, educational typologies, and norms are discussed as well as its flexible attributes for specific use in the role play context. Strategies for creating and facilitating a role play and examples of role play activities adapted for the IVE are also described.*

### INTRODUCTION

The immersive virtual environment (IVE) is a visual interactive computer-created digital world, which represents a reality in which users may immerse themselves by way of a computer interface, and relate and react in real time to a presented environment and to other users. Any person familiar with online gaming may be familiar with an IVE. Most of the online games have prescribed scenarios, changing and navigable environments

enriched with audio and visual stimuli, pre-set virtual character actors, and the ability to create an avatar, which is a game player's proxy in the virtual world. The players of these games become virtual communities inside a virtual reality world. They can, and often do, develop a strong sense of presence and connection with not only the IVE but often with other players.

Immersive virtual environments are not limited to online games alone, and may be used for purposes other than entertainment, such as education. Education can provide reflection and action

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to transform social structures and empower the individual. Freire (1994) speaks of emancipation by way of education, theorizing that people be subjects not objects who reflect and act to socially transform their world to become a more socially equitable place in which to live. The notion of people as subjects speaks as well to the individual and the ability to individually transform via reflection and action. Mezirow (1998) states that critical self-reflection of assumptions can promote “significant personal and social transformations” (p. 186). “To free ourselves from conditioned assumptions about the world, others, and ourselves ...to make moral decisions in fast changing societies, adult educators had better understand the central role played by critical reflection of assumptions” (p. 192). Transformative learning may occur by way of “challenging interactions with others,” and “by participation in carefully designed exercise and activities” (Brown, 2004, p.87).

An IVE can provide students with the transformative opportunity to reflect and act in the first person in a virtual reality setting changing not only the “real” individual but by extension the social structure and cultural surroundings in which that real individual lives and works. Because of the strong user connection between a virtual reality and the real world user, a parallel connection of presence exists and can be utilized as a process tool to work toward a just, responsible, and culturally sensitive digital citizenship. In this chapter, we will discuss the use of educational role play in the IVE as a means of social and personal transformation aimed toward positive outcomes in social and cultural sensitivity online and in the real world.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Characteristics of the IVE**

A good example of an independent IVE is Second Life® (SL). Anyone over the age of 18 with internet capability may at no cost create a basic

“resident” avatar, a personal visual representation within the online environment which can function independently and move freely almost anywhere within the IVE. The avatar is a flexible virtual entity; the avatar owner can change its appearance or gender at any time. The avatar resides within SL and, once created, can be accessed and manipulated with the proper log-in credentials on any computer with an internet connection and the SL client software installed. Avatars for the most part are virtual humans; they look, act, and move like persons in the real world. They may walk, run, sit, pick up items, and gesture; they may fly and they may “teleport” to other locations within SL, either on their own or by invitation from another user. The nature of SL allows meetings of avatars who may group socially, reacting, working, and observing together exactly as their owners do in face-to-face social meetings. Avatars may communicate with each other in real time by way of text chat, or the owner may use computer headphones and a microphone enabling their avatar to speak with, and listen to, other avatars both individually and in group settings.

Locations (“islands”) of varying size within SL may be leased for a fee, and virtual settings, architectural structures, and complex objects such as furniture may be created in these locations. Institutions, including many universities, have private islands in SL and hold regular meetings and presentations within the environment. University SL usage also includes class meetings and instructor office hours. This is a particularly attractive feature of SL for use in situations where students and faculty are scattered geographically. They can be accessed at anytime from anywhere using a internet connected computer with the client software installed. Permissions to teleport to and spend time in a private island must be specifically granted by the island owner or administrator.

Precise and elaborate virtual spaces, complete with props, may be created for the purpose of educational activities. Environmental circumstances may add to the richness of the activity allowing

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