

Virtual Worlds: Cultivating Opportunities

Children's play is about imagining new worlds, on playgrounds or computer screens. Today, a growing number of children are active in virtual worlds. Massive multi-player online games and social networks are creating new ways for interaction between children, and between the real and virtual world. At Cinekid's seminar 'Virtual Worlds: Cultivating Opportunities', four professionals in the field of on-line worlds will share their experiences and knowledge on current trends and developments in designing and marketing virtual worlds. What is the state of the art in virtual worlds for children? And how can we focus on qualitative development of these worlds?

Setting the stage

For moderator Stacey Spiegel – co-founder of Parallel Worlds Lab – virtual worlds, parallel worlds or immersive worlds are synonymous with the inspiration and creative thinking which also characterize the Cinekid festival. Spiegel expects it to be a “provocative and compelling” symposium and panel, mainly because some panelists secretly believe that broadcasting and film are dead and unable to inspire and communicate with a new generation of children. Spiegel stresses that this seminar is about “big ideas”. Panelists and audience will discuss virtual worlds from a wide range of perspectives. How are virtual worlds created technically and thought about conceptually? And how are they being designed and marketed?

Jessica Mulligan

First keynote speaker is Jessica Mulligan. She is an online game professional with over twenty years management experience in the games industry. Mulligan has been building online worlds since 1986 and worked for several companies like America Online and Electronic Arts. Besides that she is a columnist and author of a standard reference work on online games entitled *Developing Online Games: An Insider's Guide*.

Mulligan defines a virtual world as a computer-based simulated environment intended to be inhabited and interactive via avatars. There are different sorts of virtual worlds: game worlds like World of Warcraft, or social worlds like Habbo Hotel or Second Life. According to Mulligan virtual worlds have at least three things in common. First, there must be an unchanging environment: the terrain must be the same for everyone. If there is a building in the virtual world, everyone in that world will see the exact same building. Secondly, there are also unchanging effects: if something changes in a virtual world, everybody will see the same change. Third: the avatars are also a constant factor: if you buy a coat, that coat stays with you in the game.

Virtual worlds are growing fast. How many kids are using virtual worlds today? From an estimated one million users in 2004, around 35 million children in Western

countries now inhabit virtual worlds. And the trend line doesn't show any sign of leveling off at this point, says Mulligan: "It's just gonna straight up. And it actually caught the traditional game industry by surprise. None of us saw this coming. Virtual worlds like Club Penguin or Habbo Hotel came out of nowhere and built huge businesses out of it". Last year, Club Penguin was sold to Disney for 700 million dollars. Club Penguin is currently the most popular virtual world. Fifty percent of the children between seven and twelve years old that visit virtual worlds are visiting Club Penguin.

What can be said about the behavior of kids in virtual worlds? Most children like casual and simple games, says Mulligan. "You come and go, you don't have to go with a group, like World of Warcraft where it is important to play with the same group of people to stay at a certain level". When kids become older, from ten to twelve and older, they are more into complex social worlds. Most children like casual gaming, and social interaction is a very important aspect. Processes of personalization, grouping and showing off are the most common behavioral patterns of children in virtual social worlds.

For the next few years, Mulligan expects to see some interesting developments. Virtual worlds will be increasingly browser based. You won't have to download a really large application (1 gigabyte or higher) to play in a virtual world. Virtual worlds will become more accessible for children using low-tech computers and non-broadband connections. In five to seven years it will be possible to use voice commands to give your avatar orders to move around in a virtual world.

Business models will also change. In 2012 people will be paying out around thirteen billion dollars in virtual worlds. A substantial part of this payment will be done by way of micro transactions, instead of the main subscriber model where you pay a monthly fee of ten to fifteen euros to participate in a virtual world.

David Walgrave

Next speaker is David Walgrave, who works for Larian Studios, a Belgium based game developer. A few years ago Larian Studios was approached by Ketnet, a branch of the Belgian television station VRT, to create a concept for a game. Larian developed a cross-media PC game for children aged between six and twelve years old. And in 2008 Larian Studios created 'Adventure Rock' a tailor-made version of this cross-media game for Children's BBC (CBBC) in England.

In Adventure Rock children can explore a 3-D virtual world, collect coins and play mini-games. But it is not only a game, Walgrave explains. Inside the virtual world are creative studios where children can make animations, drawings, films and music. The creations made by the children are not only shown in the game, but are also used as short breaks between CBBC's television programmes.

Why do children like Adventure rock and why do they want to come back? For Walgrave, Adventure Rock appeals to children because of the variety it offers. Not only can you walk around in the 3-D world or play mini-games, you can also collect coins to buy clothes or upgrade your game world. And Adventure Rock appeals to children of different age groups. Walgrave: "A six year old will go to the drawing studio, and a twelve year old will try to tackle all the platform levels, or try to make a movie, which is a pretty complex task for a six year old".

Because of technical restrictions Adventure Rock was not designed as an online multi-player game. But, Walgrave says, children can nonetheless interact with other players,. On the Adventure Rock website forum children are finding novel ways of interacting with each other. Players come up with new story lines and invent challenges for each other. "They're making games within the game", Walgrave says, "they are asking questions like: 'how fast can you run from the shop to the music studio?' Or: 'I finished this level in less then one minute, how did you do?'" .

The goal of Adventure Rock is to collect coins, come up with cool stories and be creative. But some people want to have a clear goal, like a Mario Brothers game. Adventure Rock is an open world and children are free to do whatever they want. But there is no way of finishing the game, Walgrave says. What would Walgrave change? If he had more budget and time he would have made Adventure Rock a multi-player game, and doing so would make it possible to explore and create with other children in the game at the same time And level editors for mini-games would add value to the play experience of the children as well.

Mark William Hansen

Mark William Hansen works as a project manager for the LEGO Group, creating business strategies and play concepts for consumer-generated products and content. Today, Hansen will tell us more about his experiences working on LEGO Universe, a virtual world currently being developed by the LEGO Group. For Hansen, it all starts with the idea of a child, playing on the floor with LEGO, making up his own world. The aim of LEGO Universe is to capture this world and bring it to a digital environment. With LEGO Universe it is possible to share these worlds with other children.

According to Hansen, LEGO Universe is about building, socializing and playing. Each player is represented by a LEGO mini figure that can collect items, earn achievements and make friends within LEGO's 3-D virtual world. All "real world" LEGO products and bricks are available for children to play and to build within. LEGO Universe is intended for children between eight and twelve years old.

In the process of development, LEGO works with both children and adults. In the LEGO User Project (LUP), every week a team of thirty children and seventy adults from different countries in the world test new LEGO products and features of LEGO Universe. This development model enables the LEGO Group to stay in close contact with their target audience. But Hansen wants to make clear that there is still much to learn. "There is no game guru who has the formula to build a perfect virtual world. We're in an infant stage and there is still so much to learn and room for improvement", Hansen says. LEGO Universe's launch is scheduled for 2009.

Rob Shepherd

Last speaker at today's seminar is Rob Shepherd, founder of the Eduverse Foundation which promotes virtual environments for educational purposes. For Shepherd the main question is: what can we do with virtual worlds which is different from using them only as massive multiplayer online games or environments? Shepherd, active in Second Life since early 2007, noticed that there is a lack of direction in virtual worlds: people are bored, there is no clear goal. Shepherd: "What is needed is a different perspective on virtual worlds like Second Life",

For Shepherd, critical to success in designing virtual worlds are imagination and creativity. But most attempts to use Second Life for educational purposes suffer from too much realism. People start to build a classroom that looks exactly like one in the real world. But Shepherd wants to make clear that you need to start with the function instead of creating something people already know. Shepherd: "After you have defined the function, you come up with a problem and then can go on to a solution".

With Eduverse it is Shepherd's aim to raise awareness and a more profound understanding of the possibilities of the virtual world for educational purposes. This is important because of developments like the growth of thin client virtual worlds, and projects like One Laptop Per Child. Educational environments in virtual worlds might in the future be available for children in developing countries. In the coming months Eduverse will organize symposia and projects related to education and virtual worlds.

Panel discussion

After hearing these presentations, Stacey Spiegel wants to know what conclusions can be drawn from this seminar. What are the lessons for game developers who want to create 3-D virtual worlds for children? "Kids are changing", says Jessica Mulligan. "It is important to listen to children, to read forums, to see what they want. Because developing virtual worlds is all about co-creativity with your customers".

Although game developers design game play, it is impossible to predict exactly how children act in virtual worlds. Children are inventive and come up with their own rules and challenges, in ways unforeseen by the creators of virtual worlds. But the

panel agrees that this 'emergent behaviour' is one of the interesting aspects of virtual worlds.

Children all over the world are using virtual worlds, but there are still cultural differences which are important to know for game developers. Mark William Hansen notes that LEGO Universe is not a game, but a universe. But most virtual worlds are not universal: "The universe that LEGO has created is not built for Asia. People in Asia tend to like more simple game environments".

At the end of the seminar, someone from the audience wants to know if there are virtual worlds where families can play together. Mulligan replies that the children of today are from Generation Digital. Families will play together because not only do children like to play, but the parents grew up as players as well. Also David Walgrave expects that families will be more involved in virtual worlds and multi-user gaming in the coming years. But what will this so called 'social gaming' look like? Children like to play together with their parents, Walgrave says. But they also have a boundary line: "They don't like a father who sneaks into a game, saying 'hi, that's me in the blue car behind you'".