avalon

Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline

Story Board (Project Deliverable no. 7)

Overall Summary

This deliverable describes our thoughts and findings on using storyboards in courses. We believe that the power of narratives helps in keeping the participants focussed and attentive and thus contributes to the success of a learning event.

This deliverable is linked to the other deliverables in this work-package and the work-packages 3 and 4 of the AVALON project. It contains basic ideas about storyboards and how to apply them as well as examples from our courses and recommendations for course design.

The appendix describes the design of Avalon-island (which is the 'stage' for all Avalon-courses and thus sets the frame and atmosphere of each course's story) .

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1. Audience

The special focus of this deliverable is to create awareness for the potential of designing courses that have a story. Thus the intended audience of this deliverable are course designers, content creators and educators delivering such a course.

2. Motivation

In an environment, where you cannot take the participant's attention for granted, telling an entangling story may be a crucial success factor for the intended learning events. In a physical place students are present and usually will not be disturbed by external events (thus the educator is not in competition for the student's attention with other things that are going on). In a 3D environment however, there are lots of potential disturbances – from the physical environment (e.g. the mobile phone, kids crying next door) to other applications running on the participant's computer. Participants can always multitask, thus the teacher would hardly realize that the students is doing other things.

3. Using storyboards in courses

Methodology

In order to gain a maximum of findings, experience and useful output for our audience we applied the following methodology:

- We started with simple basic assumptions about the power and nature of storyboards.
- We thought about how to transform these assumptions into the type of learning scenarios, pedagogy and technology that we use in our courses.
- We tested our ideas in various courses, updated our findings and finally came up with a set of easy - to-follow design recommendations.

We added a description of the design of AVALON island, as this sets the stage for all the course's plots. This description can be seen as the first step in a bottom-up approach to a course's storyboard: First it's necessary to be clear about the environment (is it the middle-ages or outer space?). The environment defines the atmosphere and gives a frame to the story – thus this information is needed by all teachers who want to use AVALON island for their own courses (Appendix A).

Lastly, appendix B) shows the demonstrator "UKnow" that was implemented in WP4-3, defining the detailed content of this demonstrator and the specific learning event conducted in the demonstrator, focussing on playing the game. We build the story "top down" with a very strictly controlled user experience through the action learning events based on this specific scenario.

Basic Assumptions - and how these have been applied to Avalon's virtual world teaching scenarios

We are all little kids that need stories:

Stories are a part of our life. We grow up with fairy tales, we continue reading Tom Sawyer or Harry Potter – and even as grown-ups most people enjoy it being driven away from their current reality to a 'vacation by brain' via reading a book. It's a part of human nature that must not be negated.

Virtual worlds obviously offer themselves as environment for stories. The huge success of online games like

'World of Warcraft' has clearly demonstrated that there is a huge potential even - and especially - among grown-ups for this kind of activity. It's a powerful driving force that can be exploited for learning as well.

Obviously it is to tell the right story. The story must fit to the target group and to the context. A fairy tale for adults clearly looks different than a fairy tale for infants. Thus, when thinking about a course with a story the course designer must know exactly

- the participants (age, education, special interests),
- the context and learning goals
- the type of learning activities.

We are all little kids that like role-playing and dressing up:

Even better than just passively 'consuming' a story is participating in it. This means becoming part of the game, contributing to how it develops – and thus becoming co-creator of the experience.

Using role play can help addressing typical classrooms problems. Role play is a powerful way:

- to engage all participants in a learning activity (e.g. everybody is told to contribute to the activity from the perspective of his/her role)
- to mix students with different skills by defining roles that need different skills
- to include students that enter the course later or do not participate in all classes (they get 'guest roles')
- to save explanation time by using role models that people have available in their heads (e.g. the villain)
- to set free student's creativity and give them a way to express themselves
- to smoothly integrate 'outsiders' as further communication partners (e.g. native speakers in language courses)
- to offer participants the chance to experience themselves in various roles (e.g. try the role of the applicants as well as the one of the HR manager)
- to develop new skills in a 'safe' environment (if it's only theatre – and even in a virtual world – there is no way to blame oneself)

We learn while we play – the less an event feels like learning the better:

Little children would be puzzled if we confronted them with the view many adults have on learning: that learning is blood and sweat. Little children are always looking for the most entangling available activity and then engage so deeply, that we can hardly force them to quit and come for lunch. During their way through education children learn to refuse everything that's labelled 'learning'.
(For more inspiration on that: Invest 20 minutes and have a look at this great ted talk:
http://www.ted.com/talks/dave_eggers_makes_his_ted_prize_wish_once_upon_a_school.html)

The whole 'game-based learning'/'serious gaming' movement has already gone a long way with adapting these ideas. The good news is that you do not need any special technical skills to develop a game for your course. The only thing you need is your creativity. The most important part of each game is its story. If the story is good, then everything around becomes less important (btw, it's the same with theatre: if the play is good, then a chair will do for prop).

Conclusion: What you need, is a good storyboard!

Story and reward-model are the two sides of the same coin:

The reward-model must complement the story, especially the part where it comes to 'dragging students into it'. Reward-model and story must be forged in one piece. If they are not harmonized, they will do more harm to the student's motivation than contribute to it.

There are different ways how the story and the reward-model can be intertwined:

- It is typical for many video games, that players need to reach a certain number of points in order to be allowed to enter the 'next world', thus make the story progress. This concept can be easily applied in teaching scenarios as well, e.g.: Before the basic idea of the business plan is not approved by the jury (or tutor or peers) students must not pitch it to potential clients. OR: Before students did not successfully complete the quiz on basic grammar, they are not allowed to hand in their project description and take the next steps in their project work (e.g. meet the HR manager).

- Another option would be to couple access to roles to awards, e.g.: If you want to be the king you need a higher level in mastering court-language than if you are the servant.

- Playing the role well could mean that you 'win' some form of competitive element in the course. For example, in the Business Talking class, the role play "Pigeons in the park" was rewarded with the satisfaction of winning the argument and getting the right to decide what action was to be taken, and similarly in the Debating course, arguing well in the final debate meant that your peers voted for you and that you won the competition.

Please refer to Deliverable 6 – Reward Models for further elaboration on this subject.

4. Examples

Here are some examples of how courses that ran during the Avalon project adapted these ideas:
(for more detailed descriptions of the courses see:
http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/7682813/Developments-of-Scenarios)

Business English Course

Students find themselves in a business plan competition. They need to develop their business plan and prepare a sound presentation for the final session in the 'dragons den'. In each session, they progress one step forward toward the final product, which is the presentation. Important steps are: Finding a topic, taking over team-roles, midterm-presentation and working out a project plan. There is no explicit English teaching, but the teacher is the trainer, who helps them with the language they will need for their final presentation.

There are several roles: Project manager (the manager of the team), product manager, marketing manager, chief financial officer; if more roles are needed (e.g. for 'drop ins'): sales manager, quality manager. Roles become assigned as the result of a job interview in the 2nd meeting. Ad hoc changing of roles is possible, but will not be enforced. Students are expected to stay in their role all over the course, thus they permanently should contribute to the team's work from their role's view, which obviously is different in each role.

Participants choose the topic for their business plan themselves as a result of research and a guided discussion process, thus the topic they are talking about in class are determined by themselves.
Outsiders were added as tutors as well as dragons at the final presentation.

Italian for Beginners

In this course the dramaturgy is arranged around the final party. Most activities contribute to the common goal to have a great party at the end of the course: Preparing the location, picking the right clothes, practicing small talk, etc.

There are no special roles, but special guests are expected at the party (Italian native speakers from the Italian Second Life community), which adds a lot to the participant's motivation.

Business Talking

There are several examples of role playing scenarios in this course. For example, in the role "poisoning the pigeons" participants take on different roles in a municipality council meeting where the problems of pigeons are discussed. Some take on the role of the "defender of the environment" arguing against the use of poison to solve the problem, while others take on the role of the 'economist' and argue for a cheap simple solution etc.

5. Design recommendations

Based on the experiences we gained during our courses we are happy to share the following design recommendations:

Try it. Do it. Big or small (however it fits) – but beware of artificialness.
We believe that adding a story to a course is certainly worth trying. Even if you have never done it before: give it a chance. If you don't feel comfortable with it or if you are not sure about the reaction of your students: If you cannot think of a story for the whole course, start with one session. There is no need to let the story invade your whole course. The story must fit the course and the participants. Beware of squeezing artificially a story into a course – especially if you are not convinced about it yourself; this could end up very counterproductively.

Be creative
There is no reason why a speaking skills course couldn't be settled in the Middle Ages with knights verbally fighting for the grace of their adored princess. Sometimes there are stories that are obvious – but its always worth looking beyond one's own nose and think about new ones.

Make sure the story is understood
Take the time for a good initiation. The participants must understand the rules and the goals. This can often be done by presenting examples (e.g. if you have a business plan contest, let someone do a business plan-presentation in the first session, so students see what their final result could look like).

Bad initiation can easily lead to confusion, negative team dynamics, destructive behaviour - and finally reduce motivation instead of increasing it.

Add 'outsiders'
Students usually appreciate it a lot, if they get the chance to work with different teachers/native speakers. (Always having the same teacher can become really boring.) Depending on the course and context this can be subject matter experts, native speakers, actors, celebrities, ...: This is easily done in a virtual environment and greatly improves tension and motivation. Outsiders can be found for free (e.g. students, normal in-world-residents) or can be hired (actors).

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Keep it simple. Use the tools you have.
A good story does not need a lot of technical support. It stands by its own. Don't be depressed that you cannot compete with the technical features commercial online games are offering. Use what you have: Free place in the virtual world; simple objects (learning how to build them takes less than an hour); note cards – and outsiders.

Atmosphere is important.
In a virtual world, the surroundings and thus the atmosphere is under your control. By choosing it wisely you can take influence on student's emotional experience and thus on their behaviour. For a very formal job interview (e.g. a CEO position) an HR manager's office would look differently than if it is for a student summer job selling candy at a fair.

Let the students take the driving seat!
Let the students co-create their experience as much as possible – they love chances to become creative. Our vision is that the teacher voluntarily leaves his lectern and morphs to a moderator and facilitator – giving the floor to the students.

6. Appendix A) Avalon-island

All courses that are run within the Avalon project have their base on 'Avalonlearning', which is a place (an 'island') in Second Life ™, that was rented and designed as part of the Avalon project.

As the appearance of the surroundings contributes a lot to the general experience, the island was designed to look friendly and appealing - and at the same time provide all the spaces that are needed throughout the project.

Point of arrival

This is the place, where a visitor, who teleports to *Avalonlearning* will arrive. At the point of arrival, the visitor sees the flags of all the project partners …
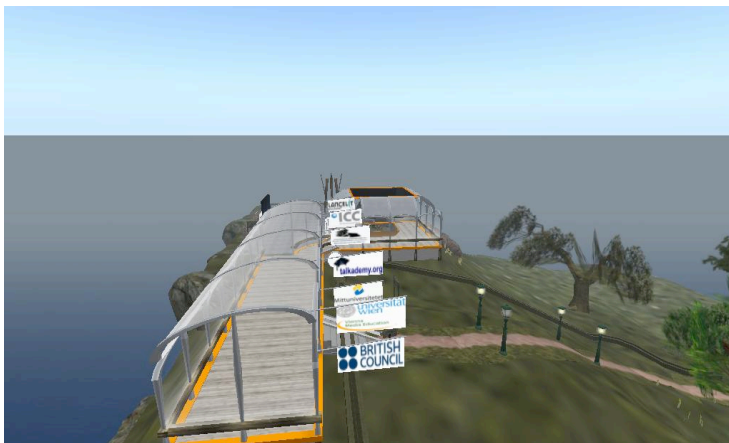

Figure 1: Point of arrival - partner logos

And a 3D-teleport map to all the important places on the island:

Figure 2: Teleport map

Furthermore, there is an exhibition area, which informs the visitor about the Avalon project and upcoming events and shows some of the results of our courses:
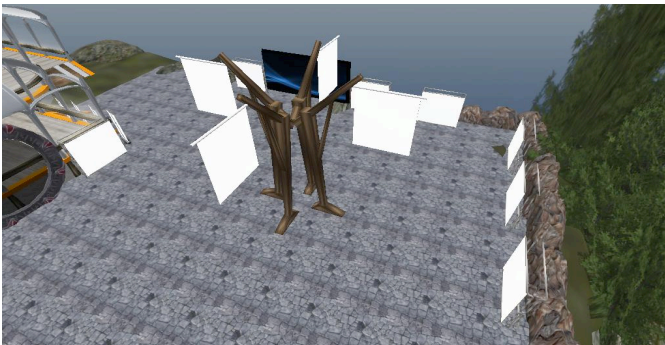

Figure 3: Exhibition area

Finally there is a 'stargate', that connects avalon-island to other language learning related islands (e.g. the British Council, Kamimo, EduNation):
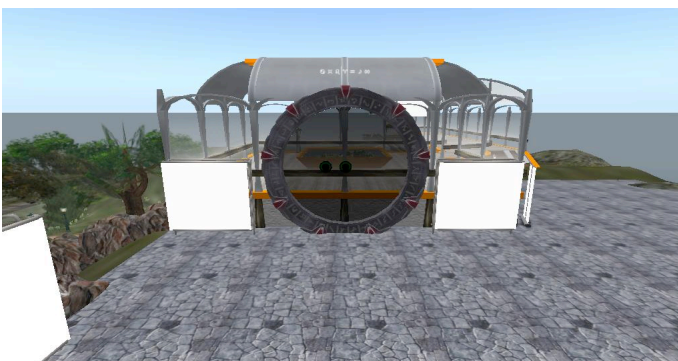

Figure 4: Stargate

Connections to other islands have in important place in the island's philosophy: We do not want to replicate things, that are available somewhere else but interlink them into Avalon. This is also the reason, why we have a harbour with regular boats going to *Kamimo island*:

Figure 5: Harbour

From the point of arrival, there is a nice winded path down to the village:

Figure 6: Path to the village

For those, who do not like to walk: You can also take the cable car for a complete tour around the island!
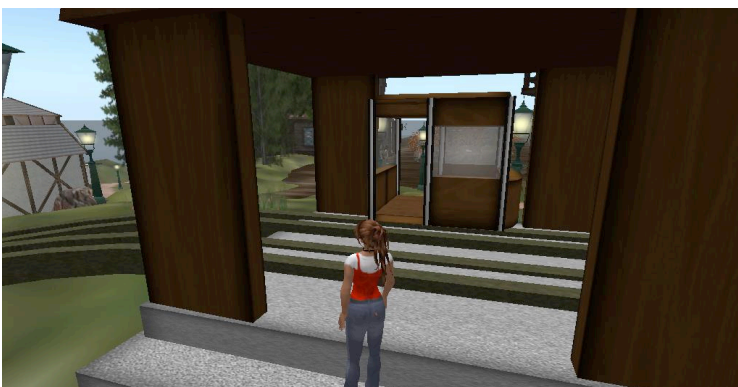

Figure 7: Cable car

Social spaces

Social spaces are spaces that are not dedicated to a certain purpose, but encourage people to meet, chat and hang out. This is especially nice, when people wait for their course to start or want to go for a chat afterwards. One of the main social spaces is the village with its pub:

Figure 8: The village

Figure 9: The pub

In the pub, there is a bar and a stage for smaller performances. There is also the possibility to play darts.

Learning spaces / course areas

One basic design principle in regards to learning spaces was, not to reconstruct spaces that we have access to on other islands. This explains why there is no lecture hall on *Avalonlearning*. Basically, the whole island can be used as learning space. Especially the village, with all the buildings and objects that can be found there, offers many opportunities for language classes.

However, there are some spaces that are especially dedicated to the courses:

The sandbox is very useful if the trainer needs to "rez" special objects which are not available on the island (e.g. a board game):

Figure 10: Sandbox

For the Business English course, there is the 'Business barn'. It is a revitalised barn which provides space for presenting and discussing business ideas.
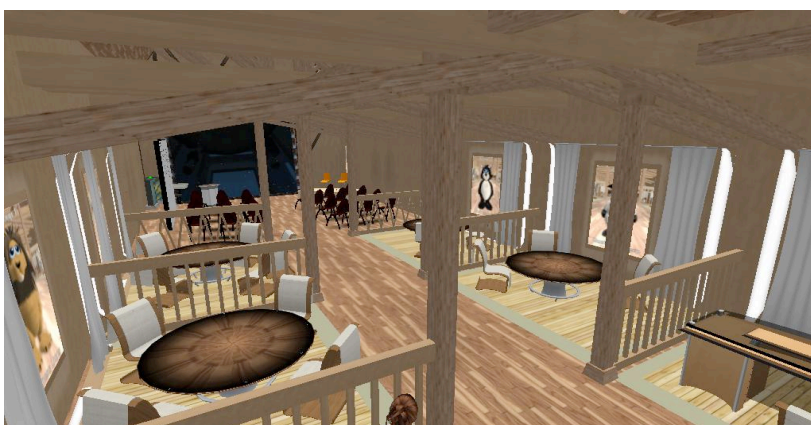

Figure 11: Business barn - outside

Figure 12: Business barn - inside

Furthermore, there are sound protected parcels in the 'settlement area' which are dedicated to teams of

students in the running courses, e.g. the teams in the Business English course.
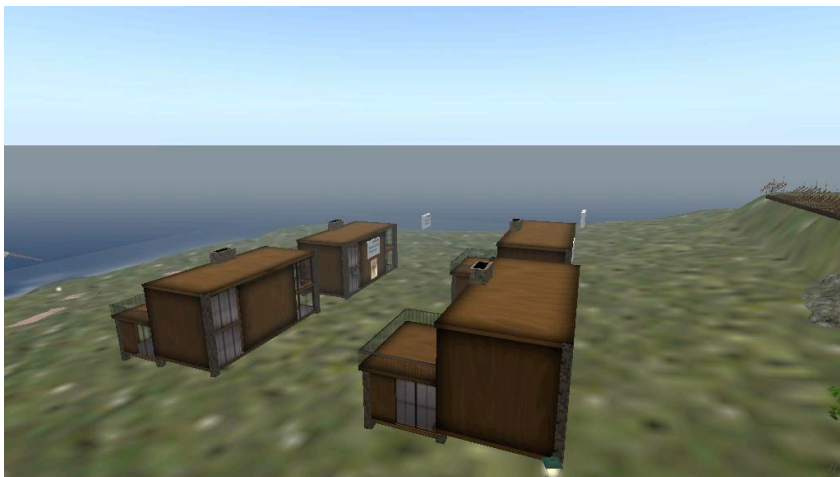

Figure 13: Settlement area

Meeting rooms

There are 2 meeting rooms, which can be used for formal (small) conferences and meetings. One is the 'teacher's area', where most of the Avalon-meetings are held.

Figure 14: teacher's area

The other one is at the first floor of the pub, the 'skybox office':

Figure 15: Skybox office

2.4.5. Festival area

The last important area is the festival area.

 Figure 16: Festival area

It has a big stage with much space in front and is the ideal location for big community parties.

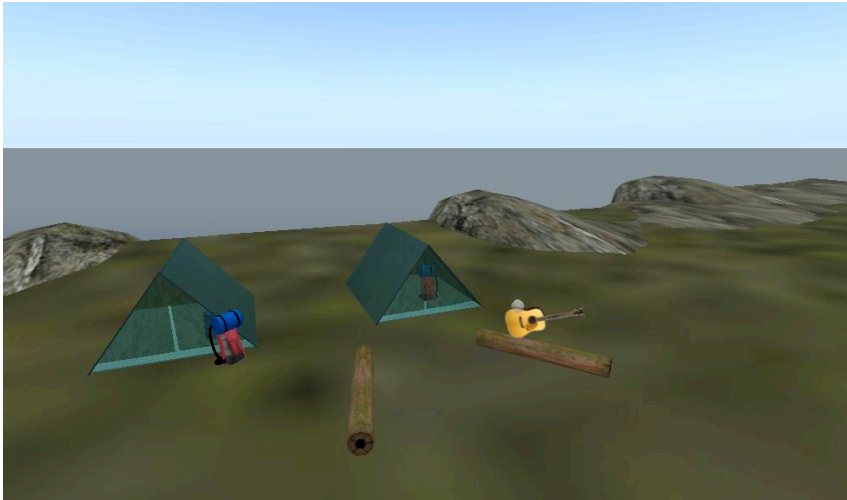There is a campground nearby for those, who didn't find accommodation in the village

Figure 17: Campground near the festival area