The use of the virtual world Second Life© for the education of team handball sport agents – A new dimension in education and in sports promotion

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INTRODUCTION
Lifelong learning is a concept which, with no doubt, is associated with the evolution of society as we know. It became a recognized need for a more competitive, cooperative, democratic, participative and equal society.

New technologies promoted access to lifelong learning, to a global scale, giving the possibility to retrieve all kind of knowledge at any time and place. Internet has revealed itself as an accessible vehicle to spread information and knowledge, being easy to manage and good from the financial and economic point of view, since it’s possible to reach a vast number of potential clients anywhere on the planet and at any time.

Virtual worlds are one those examples and have performed an important role in the development of innovative and effective strategies, which the teaching learning process is one of them. Tridimensional virtual worlds are alternative realities where their intervenient interact between them and with other present elements in those realities. In the education field it’s recognized its potential, being used by a remarkable diversity of teaching and education institutions. On a team handball coaching education level, one aspect of particular interest is the dynamic reproduction of the game (giving the possibility for a better comprehension of its dynamic and characteristics).

With this article we intend to highlight some possibilities to use Second Life in the fields of coach education and sports information through a research project presentation, framing in the team handball career and coach education.
THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF SECOND LIFE©

*Second Life* (SL) is a tridimensional (3D) world of social interaction, which is built by its own residents\(^1\) and is characterized by constant change and growth. This virtual environment was publicly opened in the beginning of 2003 and its growth has occurred without precedence, having residents in all parts of the world.

As in real life, to put content on the internet it is necessary to rent space on a server. *Linden Research, Inc* also known as *Linden Lab’s*, is the company that created SL, that rents the space on the server, which is represented by islands with particular characteristics in the virtual world. However, in this case, to build contents, the hiring of a designer may be excused, since the building is easy to learn.

As we enter this world, we quickly find wide digital continents constituted by islands, with residents, themes, entertainment, experiences and opportunities. Despite what it said SL is not a game, since there are no rules or goals established that define the action(s) of the residents. Residents are free to do what they want to, find their own way, and they can make this resemble what happens in real life. Nowadays SL is the size of one small city with an ascending population of 12 million residents. Residents are from more than 100 different countries, most of them originate from the United States of America. The age of users range between 18 and 55 years old, but the majority of users are found to be between 25 and 34 years of age.

RESIDENTS AND INTERACTION

In this virtual world its residents start by creating an Avatar, and it’s with it that they can start to explore SL. The Avatar is a tridimensional personal expression that represents the user in SL that can be configured anytime, colour of skin, eyes, type of hair, body, etc. This means that it can be a reliable representation of our real image or of that to which our imagination leads.

SL interaction allows the user to walk, run, fly and travel (by teleportation) to anywhere in the SL world. Users have a map in where they can select the place that they pretend to explore, by simple commands, similar like *Google Earth* or a *GPS* system. Travel (teleportation) is free to use, the user only has to pinpoint the destination coordinates.

Communication between users in SL besides integrated movements and body gestures in the inventory\(^2\), are done through a chat relay (like *ICQ*, *MSN*, *Windows*, *Yahoo messenger*, etc.) that allows sending private, public or grouping messages. The most recent mien of communication in SL is the possibility to interact through voice. It is an easy way to meet people with same interests and to stay in touch. Residents can also create groups that characterize their interests (communities).

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\(^1\) Residents (or inhabitants) – Characterised as all of the users registered and represented by an avatar (three-dimensional graphical model that represents the user) in the virtual world of Second Life.

\(^2\) The inventory and space that each Avatar has at its disposal and in which configurations plus acquired & created objects are saved. Inventory access is similar to that of Windows and the “drag and drop” functions.
OBJECTS AND CONSTRUCTION
Regarding the functionalities limited by the terms and conditions reserved by the island owners and the objects in question, all objects (clothing, accessories, vehicles, buildings, etc.) can be edited and created by SL residents and they interact with them.

Object building and editing are and can be produced online, excusing the need purchase and learn any additional software, because SL has one powerful application (using primitive geometric figures) that allows the undertaking of those operations in an intuitive and simple way. Once an object is built its possible to immediately to transact it, because its creator is the owner of the intellectual propriety (registered through its Internet Protocol and Avatar’s name), he’s able to track its use.

VIRTUAL ECONOMY IS ALSO... REAL!
Most of the residents are creators and content owners, which can be sold, traded, collected, given or bought generating a virtual economy with several business lines, like goods and services sales, similar to the real world.

The existence of markets allows the production of transactions rounding approximately 7 million Euros. These virtual transactions are made in a proper trade currency unit, the Linden dollar, than can be converted in Euros. This represents that what is virtual economy in a virtual world.

Real trade in SL represents one of the first and most experienced activities. Therefore the trading in SL has similar aspects with real life, since it allows residents social interaction in the virtual world and simultaneously has a wide range of choices that the Web can offer. Data from Linden Lab’s estimate that 40 major companies are using SL, that represents about 1.2 million of collaborators registered in this virtual world.

THE EDUCATIVE POTENTIAL
SL represents a new way to attract students to distance learning. The free share and exhibit of interactive information are a reality that SL can provide.

One of the more effective means of teaching in this world is the collaborative one. SL demonstrates huge advantages in collaborative work between the residents, not only in a class setting but also worldwide, becoming possible to bring the classroom to the student’s home. This tridimensional environment displays an apppellative image similar to games, which leaves the students more able to develop and produce their projects.

With the possibility to use voice in public (or private) conversations and its recording for future reference use, like videos, learning through SL shows great potential, because it allows its users to go to a specific thematic place to consult or produce practical experiences.

Nowadays, there are more than 100 education institutions in SL, marking their presence, in this virtual world, with a simple class project or even the creation of a SL university to develop
studies and research. Higher education institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and Cambridge use SL for human resources education and to present research knowledge.

These facts show us that SL tools promote a wide and potential field for the use of simulations on the education of human capital.

VIRTUAL WORLD AS AN EDUCATIONAL AND PROMOTIONAL PLATFORM FOR TEAM HANDBALL

SPORTS AGENTS EDUCATION IN TEAM HANDBALL

Athlete’s education and training are one of the main concerns to the team handball qualitative development, so there is a need to promote the intervention quality of coaches and all other sports agents.

Coach’s functions are to guide, give orientation, supervise and coordinate, in an autonomous manner, the preparation, perfection and performance of the athletes and teams.

The creation of team handball coach’s career and coach education and training allows for the establishment of a framework within which the qualifications described, justified with their diploma / certificate, are mutually recognized by several national and international organizations in sports and professional area. This certification is a recognition which is a guarantee of safety, ethics and the quality of intervention and competence. Thus it is believed that the requirement in the field of coach education and with a rigorous system of measurement, in a process of continuous training education, will result in the improvement of game quality as future consequences.

Today’s team handball coach’s career and coach education training presents a curriculum in terms of working hours and content, prepared and suited to meet the requirements of professional qualification and the requirements in legislative changes and international guidelines.

These education and training frames with a larger number of knowledge and intervention areas logically require greater working hours of study. The significant increase in working hours with the final purpose to obtain an improvement of the game, through the preparation of coaches promoting more content and more evaluation instances, requires the use of resources that suit the needs and potential of this reality.

Thus, the courses are structured to be completed between one to two years, depending on the individual situation of each coach, with a view to continuing training, by periods of concentrated and specialized information, project and stage, in a form that increases diversification and working hours. Therefore, it favours the continuity and versatility qualitative training education. The current model of coach education and training has the following characteristics:

- Modular - the courses structure consists of training modules allowing more and better training opportunities according to the availability of the coach;
- Individual - allows students to organize their training guided by specific content, the way they integrate and needs, according to the degree and own curriculum;

- Continuous - the modular content distribution in different hour loads allows the trainees to be in permanent training, thereby obtaining the possibility of a versatile update from the framework of knowledge.

These features allow promotion and creation training opportunities for different coaches, enabling the monitoring of developments in scientific knowledge and methodologies that are part of the process of training.

However it is necessary to improve the training process, with the use of new technologies (e-learning and b-learning) which in turn will produce profound changes in the coaches training, the content being taught in addition to the frequency, selection of the lecturing body and how evaluations are undertaken.

Given the above becomes an urgent appeal to the use of synchronous and asynchronous learning to improve the training investment, an opportunity is presented that allows these two methods, giving the coaches in training the possibility to be in permanent contact with the training module.

By the Avatar’s representation they always can be present accessing the various forms of their training procedures: theoretical subject, observing and assisting practical subjects.

SECOND LIFE IN TEAM HANBALL SPORT AGENTS EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The purpose of this project is to create a platform for training and education for team handball coaches and teachers in a virtual world. The research project is to create a context simulation of interaction sequences from the offensive and defensive processes of the organized method of team handball game, using models in three-dimensional virtual world Second Life. This simulator will be used as part of the training and education activities of team handball sport agents.

The simulator will allow the analysis, in virtual three-dimensional context, the sequences of interaction of offensive and defensive planned moves, in a wide variety of angles, allowing the interaction of actors (sports agents) in real time. Thus, it is intended that the trainees have the opportunity to interact with the trainer and the sequence in demonstration, while allowing them to visualize and assimilate the main features of that method of the game. It will be a created database of technical specifications and guidelines and concrete tactics, analysis and commentary, involving the participation and collaboration of all its stakeholders. These data will come from the interaction offensive and defensive observation and patterns detection over the organized method from the most important international competitions of team handball game.
The creation of an appropriate place for the conduct of such activities is already underway, having been already presented the first field of team handball in Second Life, which is located on the island of Utopia (University of Trás-os-Montes-e- Alto Douro), which was already possible to see a small simulation of avatars.

The company Beta Technologies has cooperated enthusiastically taking part on this project, which has until now sponsored two training activities for team handball coaches in this virtual world. The last of which included the participation of lecturer Paulo Jorge Pereira (Paulo Quandry, Grade 3 coach that worked as a professional coach in Spain).

Another fundamental aspect implemented to provide conditions for a better performance, mobilization, information and promotion of quality is the participation of experts, sports officials and others involved in the sport. In this connection the first handball community in Second Life was established.

**FIRST COMMUNITY OF TEAM HANDBALL IN SECOND LIFE**

The establishment of the team handball community allows for the discussion of other technical factors in a collaborative environment and in a pleasant and simple, graphical representation in the already known models in 2D and in 3D simulators. The contribution of this community goes beyond the project initially presented here, since all suggestions contribute to the development of the team handball game in this virtual environment and in the teaching/learning process.

In the future we intend to draw up a Wikipedia page devoted exclusively to team handball and one (or more) mailing list on which it is possible to clarify doubts, organize discussion forums about team handball in real life and in SL. These lists represent yet another way to share experiences in education, training and research and to establish contacts with colleagues and possibly employees/collaborators. These mailing lists will also be used to send alerts educational opportunities, training and events in SL, disclosure of work and research projects in our sport, representing an opportunity for the various actors to communicate with each other. Searching using the keyword handball will allow people to find and enrol in the community.

**SOME REMARKS**

The involvement of different sports agents around the sports system depends on the functions that are inherent in it and their time availability. The conjectural spectrum requirements require equal opportunity and availability in the qualitative and quantitative measures for sports education and training.

This virtual world will enable its residents to have an almost unique experience that until now was not accessible to everyone, and with obstacles overcome the impression of the team handball game that they’ve had until now therefore completely changes. The real potential of this virtual world is unquestionable and unlimited in all dimensions of our society. As a recent
phenomenon and unprecedented development, research, exploration and consequences of this virtual world are still at a stage that can be called "embryonic", however new information emerges everyday. It is possible to say that it is expected that the SL represents and will become a three-dimensional version of what the Internet is today - a platform for sharing information between people with the advantage of being built and carried out in three dimensions, for each of its users.

Around our elected sport, the submitted draft and activities related to it already led to some consideration and ideas in one place that is accessible to all. Therefore, it is possible to point out some suggestions for better implementation of this process:

- Conducting training for better use of resources of this virtual world (basic commands, some rules and use of communication and object interaction),

- Increase the level of coverage and participation of the sample and themes: coaches, referees, managers.

- Possibility of integrating different training aspects in one activity for all sports agents, simultaneously, in one place (e.g. sequences of attack and defence along with referees and officials; training for delegates; potential of sports marketing in SL).

There are infinite possibilities to explore; we hope that you join us and contribute with your participation, by logging on and register at www.secondlife.com!

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