

Enhancing Accessibility through Virtual Worlds: the case of Virtual Learning and Support Communities for People with Disabilities in Second Life

Asimina Katsouda, MEd, MSc
asiminakatsouda7@gmail.com

Introduction

The most popular virtual platform with multi-user online virtual worlds is Second Life (SL), which has over 70 million total users, including users with various disabilities. Additionally, in SL, there are Virtual Communities that organize educational projects, seminars, awareness-raising events, and many open activities.

Research Projects and Documentaries about People with Disabilities in Second Life

Virtual Worlds and New Cultures of the Embodied Self by Tom Boellstorff and Donna Davis -supported by the National Science Foundation- focused on the experience of PwD in SL and the role of digital bodies in improving their lives.

Our Digital Selves: My Avatar is Me (2018) Documentary by Bernhard Drax
Login2Life (2011) Documentary by Daniel Moshel

Methodology

A case study was conducted within the SL environment. The aim was to investigate and document Virtual Learning and Support Communities for People with Disabilities (PwD) or/and other chronic health conditions.

Conclusions

SL provides numerous opportunities for socialization and employment for PwD who may not be able to work in the physical world, along with many avenues for creative expression. Additionally, it offers access to various virtual entertainment spaces, as well as cultural and educational virtual environments/worlds and projects. SL is also utilized in the context of Distance Education. Furthermore, there are many Virtual Communities that support PwD and their caregivers.

Virtual Communities for People with Disabilities and chronic health conditions

Virtual Ability: since 2007, it has had over 1,000 members from six continents, covering a wide range of disabilities: physical, developmental, mental, emotional or sensory (blindness or deafness). It provides educational, social, and entertainment opportunities. A quarter of the members are family members or friends of PwD, healthcare professionals, caregivers, or researchers interested in disability issues.

Ethnographia Island: created by Tom Boellstorff as part of a study on disabilities and new cultures of the embodied self, conducting meetings where individuals with disabilities or other health conditions share their experiences in their physical and virtual worlds, engaging in discussions directly related to disability and how it affects their lives.

forget ME not: created to raise awareness about Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS). It organizes various activities and events aimed at raising awareness, raising funds for critical research to support the Open Medicine Foundation, and providing a safe space for sufferers.

Fearless Nation PTSD Support: targets individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), their families, partners, children, and communities.

Etopia & Brain Energy Support Team: targets marginalized PwD, specifically those with brain injuries, organizing educational programs for themselves and their caregivers to improve social, professional, and daily skills.

Whole Brain Health (WBH): organizes activities to improve focus, attention, concentration, processing speed, problem-solving abilities, memory, positive emotions, self-expression, social interactions, and self-care, contributing to brain health. This community is not exclusively for PwD, but its activities can be very beneficial for them.

Creations Park: offers support and research groups on the positive effects of SL for people with Parkinson's disease.

Cape Able Art Gallery: a virtual gallery owned by Virtual Ability Inc., hosting art exhibits from deaf and other artists.

Cape Serenity Library: a virtual library with a collection of works by authors with disabilities.