

NEWSLETTER #2

May 2020

Development updates

The Show Must Go On

In December 2019, we started with the development of our first Intellectual Output: Virtual Worlds. The development of these worlds is planned for an eight-month period, from December 2020 to July 2021.

We started the development process by choosing four different worlds that would later become our virtual environments for language learning tasks: an international space station, a deserted tropical island, a square in ancient Rome, and a world covered in ice. Each of these worlds was chosen to facilitate different types of tasks, such as escape-room style activities, giving and following directions and collaborating on creative constructions. Once defined, our development team started building these Virtual Worlds, one at the time.

In March 2020, the world was hit by the coronavirus pandemic. While that certainly slowed us down a bit (as some partners are based in countries that were hit hard), we found a way to push on through as a team. As a result, we completed three out of four worlds by the end of May 2020.

The development progress can be found on VR4LL's YouTube channel at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChsNCjW2gcOD8IEPzbgz6gA>

Please support our project by following our channel and sharing our videos. More exciting content will be published as we progress further into the project.



Early activities with students

Dipping into the Virtual World: An Exciting Experiment in IH Bucharest's English Class

By Manuela Lataretu

During the first half of 2020, the VR4LL development team sent some ready products to try out on our Oculus Quest headsets. As we started exploring these Virtual Worlds, we decided to 'take our students' pulse' by using the VR headsets in our English class.

Thus, one day, two 16-year-old teenage students (supported by their teacher) put on the headset and gave it a go. We were very curious to hear their feedback about diving into the world of virtual reality - what was it like to find yourself suddenly 'teleported' from the familiar environment of the IH Bucharest classroom to appear in London's Canary Wharf? We admit we were a bit nervous at first, as these were uncharted waters, even for us.

The students tested out some of the games offered by Oculus while performing team activities: giving each other directions and suggestions to overcome specific challenges, such as one student guiding his 'blindfolded' peer, using only English. Our initial apprehension and anxiety were quickly washed away by enthusiasm and curiosity.

Total immersion offered by virtual reality technology enriches the language learning experience with sounds, images, atmosphere and sensations. Our VR4LL project accomplishes this by putting learners in an environment that they explore by completing specific tasks and reaching clear objectives. Some of these tasks initially proposed by our team include repairing damage to a space station, surviving on an island after a shipwreck and solving a murder mystery in ancient Rome. In such exciting environments students can easily overcome any anxiety that occurs naturally in the classroom.

And the use of English? Our students were so absorbed by achieving the objective of the activity that they ended up using English freely and naturally. It seemed that the fear of making mistakes 'vanished in the heat' of tackling the virtual world and communication between students became more natural, even trying out unfamiliar words and expressions. The other outcome of this learning experience observed by the teacher was the interdependence required to overcome challenges, which significantly contributed to students' appreciation of their teammates, resulting in more bonding and building of mutual trust.

After they took off their headsets, students described their experiences and swapped impressions. Some of their comments included:

"It was **really rewarding** that we managed to solve a problem in a new, unfamiliar place."

"We had a **great time** moving around, climbing and running inside virtual world."

"It was **interesting and relaxing** to carry out this experiment in our English class."

With such excellent feedback, we're very excited about the next stage of the VR4LL project and implementing our very own virtual environments at our own school.



Are you ready for the VR revolution?

On 11th March BBC Radio Scotland broadcast a programme in its Brainwaves series, which asked the question 'Are you ready for the VR revolution?' Pennie Latin, the programme's presenter, investigated the possible impact of VR technology in a variety of different contexts. For example, an Oxford based company has been using VR to help people overcome certain anxieties, such as a fear of heights. The company claims that VR has helped reduce this fear in two-thirds of the cases they have dealt with, which is a much higher result than more traditional, face-to-face therapy has been able to achieve.

Based on this sort of evidence, it isn't too difficult to imagine how VR technology could also help people overcome the natural anxiety many of us feel when asked to use a foreign language in public for the first time.

The programme also investigated how VR is being used in a Scottish primary school. Students were investigating how the aurora borealis is formed and were given the opportunity to experience the aurora for themselves using VR. The students obviously loved the experience and, as their teacher attested, learning clearly improves with engagement.

No one is suggesting that students of whatever age or subject should spend hours on end using VR technology, but as presenter Pennie Latin concluded following her own investigation, "Used in the right place, in the right way, VR is amazing."

This episode of the Brainwave series is still available on the BBC website here:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000g3s3>

Second transnational meeting coming up

Our second transnational meeting is planned for the end of June 2020. Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus restrictions, we will not be able to meet live in Barcelona (Spain) as was originally planned. Nevertheless, thanks to the technological advances of the 21st century, we will be able to organize our two-day meeting with all planned activities fully online. And with a bit of creativity, we might even be able to host virtual social events 😊.

The main topic of the second transnational meeting will be giving feedback on the Virtual Worlds. After exploring each world, our partners' feedback will be necessary for agile software development. Partners will also make all preparations needed for the next stage of development: Virtual Tasks.

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