Why Immersive Worlds

An article on immersive world and why it's needed in the realm of learning. It focuses on what immersive reality means and what it brings to the learner and how it's changing the way learning is happening in current times.

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Immersion or immersive reality is the simulation of being physically present in a non-physical world. The idea of immersive reality has been the cornerstone of science fiction books and a recurring theme in terms of story narrative. This immersion into VR over the past few years has gained momentum and adoption. The idea of creating a non-physical or virtual world is fast gaining acceptance across education, corporations because it helps in training, learning, simulation and generally provides more focus to the learner.

There are a number of technologies or platforms that can be defined as "Immersive Worlds" or "Virtual Worlds". Virtual worlds are an area of growing interest in many sectors. Web-based tools have existed for years to help deliver course content but have worked in a more traditional approach. Web-based tools have not provided collaboration, creation of a community and a world wherein the rules necessary to exist in that world apply. This creation of a virtual world has helped in more engagement with learners and between learners, which is necessary for successful teaching and learning.

In the context of this article, immersive technology is a framework of tools that allow users to "immerse" themselves in an environment or experience designed to promote and/or facilitate innovative thinking and prototyping. The virtual world thus represented creates avatars as representation of learners/users and they either compete against other avatars or work together for a common goal. The immersive world also fosters imagination and role play as the actual journey of learning revolves around an underlying story or plot that helps in the flow and interaction. Learning does not feel like a traditional classroom or even a work space and learners can be taken anywhere in the world or into make believe worlds to help them achieve their learning goals through games, role plays and collaboration. The idea of an immersive world also means that the rules will be different from the real world and hence allows users to learn difficult tools, concepts and allows different degrees of freedom for exploration, idea generation and other innovation activities.

Earlier, the idea of games for education and learning originated from "war games" and this could very well be the reason for many of the games to be first shooter POV based ones. Gamification and the world of immersive games are being adopted by educational institutions & corporations who have realized that the traditional modes of classroom and instructor led trainings have not had complete effectiveness and also are left wanting in the realm of teaching some precise skills. As organizations continue investing in developing the talent of their employees, they are seeing a need to formulate learning strategies of real value. In this aspect, an immersive learning environment has particular edge over many other forms of learning, because:

1. Immersive learning does not need colocation of its learners – workforce can be fragmented, across levels, age groups and skill levels. Learning depends on the structure of the immersive world design, its game play, and its goal and based on that its learning experience. The learners can live in this virtual world and learning can be asynchronous, user prerogative allowing for learners to participate when it's convenient to them.

2. The fun aspect of games have been explained in many articles and case studies. Learning gets a boost when there is a story narrative at its base and the avatars or actors in play have a goal to achieve as part of this learning. Immersive world allows a feature- and content-rich environment that not only helps the learner get new skills but also allows them learning in a world that is different from their daily rigmarole.

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3. Immersive world provides instantaneous and corrective feedback when compared to on-the-job training. In on-the-job training, the trainee or learner has to be a passive learner whereas in the immersive world he/she is an active participant and they get engaged with the topic on hand at an executor level.

4. Virtual worlds allows scope for error, fatalities and learning from mistakes which will be costly and dangerous in the real world. A learner who has to work on an oil rig or a high tension zone like air traffic can work best in an immersive virtual world till he is confident enough to work in the real world.

5. Virtual worlds also allow the learner to experience varying levels of difficulty, and based on this, plan their next move. This enables employees and students to keep challenging themselves in their current area of expertise and also pick up skills of a higher degree of complexity.

6. Device proliferation of wearables, smart phones, game consoles, VR headsets are also making adoption and growth of immersive learning.

However, there also exist some barriers that are affecting the adoption and growth of immersive worlds. Some of these include:

1. Immersive reality and role play are still considered by many as distractions or games and not really learning. The learning department hence has to grapple with explaining the need for this form of training

2. Technology for immersive reality is really growing fast but adoption also has to happen at the same pace to make immersive worlds as a preferred choice for learning

3. Learner acceptance has to be strengthened by evangelizing about this technology as learners should see this platform as a tool for learning new concepts, working in high stress zones and not a diversion from their work

4. Immersive worlds and its learning is a far cry from traditional modes of learning and hence there will be some hurdles in terms of learning curves that need to be considered. Evangelizing and making this technology mainstream will help remove some of these hurdles

Organizations have come to realize the need for quality learning and are now adopting this idea of an immersive world into their training curriculum and learning managers and instructional designers are making conscious efforts to showcase that world as something beyond the superficial layers of games.

In conclusion, immersive world and its usage is proliferating… simply because in some instances, virtual worlds offer solutions that are easier to implement and are more powerful than their real world instance or even traditional mode of learning. Immersive worlds have helped in rapid deployment of zones, areas and role playing in a world that was not accessible easily in the real world. Immersion has also helped in deeper learner engagement, interaction, collaboration and group decision making. Technology is transforming education at a phenomenal speed than ever and the naysayers of the earlier decade who saw immersion as a game are soon realizing the benefits of an immersive world and are starting to adopt it as part of their learning curriculum.