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River City Project

Advanced Teaching Technologies: Brave New World

12/28/2006

By Joseph C. Panettieri

All the Right MUVES

Below, quick snapshots of the MUVES you should know.

Environment: River City

Backer: Harvard University (MA)

Purpose: 3D immersive learning environment similar to The Sims video game. Teaches students reasoning and problem-solving, with an emphasis on science.

More Info: [website](#)

Environment: Whyville

Backer: Independent

Purpose: Social environment that allows students to make their way within a virtual economy.

More Info: [website](#)

Environment: Quest Atlantis

Backer: Indiana University

Purpose: 3D learning environment.

More Info: [website](#)

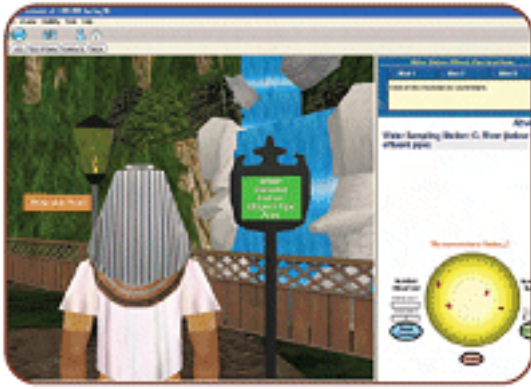
Environment: Tapped In

Backer: [SRI International](#)

Purpose: Text-based collaborative environment where educators support each other and share best practices.

More info: [website](#)

In River City, for instance, students travel back in time, using their 21st-century skills and technology to address 19th-century problems. The students work together in small research teams to help the virtual town address health issues. They keep track of clues that hint at causes of illnesses; they form and test hypotheses; they develop controlled experiments to test their hypotheses; and they make recommendations based on the data they collect—all in an online environment, says Dieterle.



IN RIVER CITY, students learn to become scientists via avatars in a virtual 19th-century world. Their every keystroke is captured, notifying teachers what students do and don't know.

“We capture every keystroke that every student makes,” says Dieterle. “Students complete activities that are processed on servers, and e-mail updates allow teachers to understand what students do and don't know. This allows teachers to guide students through assessment, rather than putting kids on the spot with questions.”

In contrast, Whyville is a virtual world with 1.7 million registered “citizens.” The system has its own newspaper; its own senators; its own beach, museum, City Hall, and town square; its own suburbia; and even its own economy (citizens earn “clams” by playing educational games). “It's a place where students build identity,” Dieterle explains.

Although Whyville is designed for kids, educators foresee a day when similar MUVES allow college students to study economics, social interactions, criminal justice, and so forth. “The range of potential applications is practically limitless,” says Paul Lipsky, an associate professor at NYIT who specializes in 3D computer graphics.

Another MUVES, Tapped In, is a text environment where professional educators collaborate with one another. Tapped In offers free professional development via hundreds of subject-area rooms (Math Resources, Science Resources, ESL teachers, etc.), and almost daily calendared events. “There are also regularly scheduled tours, and someone is almost always available on HelpDesk,” says Cooper.

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