

GimpGirl Community's Best Practices for Facilitating an Accessible Community in a Virtual World

Katherine Mancuso, Jennifer Cole

Abstract – GimpGirl's mission is to connect women with disabilities through social technologies to support each other's lives. We have been an online community in a variety of forms (LiveJournal, mailing lists, MOOs) for eleven years, and we ventured into Second Life and a variety of Web 2.0 incarnations (including Moodle, Twitter, and Facebook) about a year ago. As far as we are aware our community is unique in the virtual world disability community in integrating a virtual world and active web-based communities. We are one of only a few organizations that is concerned primarily with providing social support, being radically inclusive of all women with disabilities, and teaching self-advocacy/self-efficacy. We believe recommendations based on the lessons we have learned, particularly over the last year, about how universal design and accessibility apply to online community design and cross-platform integration are translatable to other community building and collaboration efforts.

I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional model of access to virtual worlds has been primarily centered on providing client-side accommodations for the individual user's disability. Virtual Ability has been a pioneer in this sphere, and they won a well-deserved Linden Prize this year for taking many of the first steps in educating individuals in how to get accommodations and access for themselves (Zielke, Roome & Krueger 2009). For example, users with low vision might get "guide dogs" which identify nearby avatars and objects, as well as help navigate in-world and a screen reader which reads text chat aloud (Linden 2009). This is the traditional model of accessibility, in which needs are accommodated on a case-by-case basis.

When accessibility in the virtual world has focused on a larger community rather than an individual, it has mostly focused on replicating architectural accessibility as found in the real world. For example, installing wheelchair ramps in Second Life is an important first step to providing a welcoming environment for avatars who choose to use wheelchairs as part of their identity, and to build awareness around the need for physical accessibility of buildings in real life. There is much good work being done to address these concerns, but we argue that more work is necessary to create truly accessible spaces.

K. Mancuso is Graduate Research Assistant at the Center for Assistive Technology and Environmental Access, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia, and Community Liaison, GimpGirl Community.

J. Cole is Director, GimpGirl Community.

We ground our recommendations in a philosophy called universal design. In the founding documents for the Center for Universal Design, Ron Mace defined universal design as "the design of . . . environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." In this poster, we argue that it is crucial for community leaders to understand how to make conversations accessible to not only people with disabilities, but people who may have difficulty with communication for other reasons, and that the burden for providing accessibility lies with those facilitating conversations, not with the individual.

II. METHODOLOGY

At AoIR 9.0 we presented an autoethnography focusing on the ten-year history of the group (Ospina, Cole & Nolan 2008). This poster focuses on lessons learned in the past year as we worked to integrate Second Life and Web 2.0 spaces. We generated our recommendations for creating accessible community in a virtual world and integrating it with web platforms to enhance accessibility through auto-ethnographic reflection by key staff members of the community. We draw from our experience of community-based participatory design work applying web accessibility standards, conducting user testing on our various sites, participant observation, and active discussion about accessibility methods at our own meetings and events, as well as those held by other organizations.

III. RESULTS

Based on practices we have tested, we will give detailed recommendations for universal design of virtual world spaces, including methods of facilitating conversations to allow for participation by as many people as possible, and how to compensate for the inaccessibility of virtual world communication tools by using other synchronous and asynchronous community platforms including a variety of Web 2.0 platforms. Additionally, we will discuss how communities who share a sense of purpose, provide open forums for feedback, and include diverse ideas in planning aid in furthering the goals of universal design. A variety of use cases including business, education, and support will be discussed.

IV. CONCLUSION

We believe this work is extremely significant because it is one of the earliest attempts at documenting best practices in accessibility for a virtual world space, and the first that we

know of to focus primarily on practices that benefit the entire community rather than on virtual world accessibility for specific disabilities. We believe that this work can have a broad impact on a range of virtual world discourse spaces because it is based on the principles of universal design which benefit everyone, not just people with disabilities. These principles are ideal for spaces where facilitators are wishing to include highly diverse audiences with needs outside the norm including people with disabilities, different types of learners (visual, kinesthetic, linguistic), and students who face non-disability related barriers (socioeconomic, language).

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