

Highly Interactive Virtual Environments - Terminology

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The term *interactive virtual learning* is a broad term that encompasses myriad different specific approaches. Using the term is to essentially refer to a genre, rather than a specific methodology, approach, or technology.

In order to understand the different approaches that are part of interactive virtual learning, we need to define some terms.

Educational Simulations

These are structured environments which are abstracted from some real-world activity. An educational simulation has stated levels and stated goals. Participants are allowed to practice real-world skills and obtain feedback without affecting real processes or real people.

Virtual Worlds

These are 3 dimensional environments wherein participants from different physical locations can come together virtually. Social cues can be realized, surroundings simulated, and real interactions modeled. Participants are allowed to alter their environment through construction, destruction, or modification. If you are familiar with *Second Life*, it is a good example of a virtual world.

Virtual worlds are flexible and somewhat unstructured to allow for a realistic environment. Real world activities such as entertainment, meetings, virtual events, and mentoring can be undertaken.

Serious Games

These are interactive experiences which are fun and engaging for the participants. They usually require no coaching or outside help. Perhaps you are familiar with *Sim City*, an excellent example of a serious game. A serious game is easy to use, yet presents a complicated and interesting system. These games, however, are not designed to model reality in an accurate way. They are highly extracted from reality and are designed for maximum engagement, not learning transfer.

Class Games

These are short activities that can be accomplished in a traditional class period. They are designed primarily for student engagement.

Virtual Classrooms

These tools provide an infrastructure for synchronous classes and meetings, integrating all traditional instructional approaches and tools into a single entity. *Elluminate* (now called *Blackboard Collaborate*) is a virtual classroom.

Group Challenges

These are activities where people must work together to accomplish something. Typically, such an activity would require participants to role-play and discover, rather than just apply, a solution.