# Unlocking the Client's Internal Dialogue with Virtual Worlds

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# INTRODUCTION

"The overwhelming finding was that technology and cyber communication has not only "crept" into traditional social work practice but, indeed, signifies a turning point" (Mishna et al, 2012). Whether we like it or not, technology touches almost every aspect of our lives and has become an essential relational medium for social and professional use. Coaching and therapy is increasingly delivered remotely, due to the demand for less travel and improvements in the capability and quality of the supporting technology.

ProReal is a new, purpose-built virtual reality platform for therapists and coaches who want to work remotely with clients. In addition to the remote working capability, it adds to the therapeutic process with a dynamic and creative visual representation of a client's inner and outer world. In this article we describe the thinking behind the design, the applications for therapeutic use and the potential benefits for the therapeutic relationship.

# DESIGN

The ProReal platform was originally designed to apply 3D virtual world technology as a basis for remote working in sociodrama and psychodrama. The initial design was then further enhanced to include a 'landscape' and props as opportunities to explore metaphor and symbols.

Building on the considerable body of research on therapeutic landscape, the decisions on the setting were important. The current landscape has a number of features taken from classic story symbolism and includes roads, mountains, a ravine, a river and a castle. Each feature has meaning;

for example mountains represent our higher goals and aspirations, while gates signal key moments or rites of passage. We're familiar with these metaphors and symbols as we refer to "the crossroads in my life" or "an uphill struggle". ProReal is considering whether future developments to the virtual reality landscape would include more familiar settings, for example by including a home, street or office space. This approach would give a more literal space in which a client can express and inquire;

however this would make the unconscious levels of story and metaphor less accessible in a visual form.

The use of avatars was selected in order to provide a level of "association" with the client's world. The avatars in ProReal are plain and androgynous to enable the client to project their reality onto them. The considerations associated with this approach, compared with options for male or female avatars, are complex. Gender-specific avatars require

clothing and therefore can bring meaning that might influence the response in the client. Our experience is that clients quickly develop a strong sense of association with these avatars and engage their own sense of identity for each avatar. Similarly, the location of the avatar in the landscape can trigger an emotional response, for example when nearing the edge of a ravine.

To enable a client to connect and project a useful degree of reality to an avatar, there are

each can be given a speech caption, size and colour – they travel with the client as if attached.

Ease of use was an important design criterion. The user interface is simple and intuitive, to support a client's flow of expression and avoid any barriers caused by complex option selection. As the first 30 minutes represent a key phase of engagement, the client is encouraged to make early decisions in avatar selection, movement and scene creation. The design is based on a client-centred approach, i.e. the therapist is encouraged to allow the client to take control of the platform whilst supporting with questions and prompts as part of the therapeutic process.

To build further reality and texture into the client's world, the platform provides options to include a number of props. The value of these props becomes clear as we listen to language: the 'elephant' in the room; the 'wall' between people or groups; the 'bomb' about to go off; the 'key' to solving a problem. The props can be placed anywhere in the world and named, to help bring to life more of the texture

additional options to represent levels of authority, attitudes, emotion, thought and speech. Avatars are given a colour which helps with identity and is part of meaning making. Each avatar can be sized, which enables the client to visually represent the importance, authority or perceived power. Avatars are given a posture to represent an attitude or emotion. These postures form a useful role in creating the client's reality and in making the conversation about emotions

more accessible. Thought and speech bubbles can be ascribed to any avatar and are designed to represent the essence of that avatar's thinking, judgement, or intention.

Internal monologue, or "inner voice", is represented by head-like figures behind the client avatar's head. These voices are the parts of the client that are ever present and influential. In the ProReal world only the client's inner voices are represented (up to four) and

and complexity of the story or drama. The fast-turning hands on the clock face prop have been known to give clients goose bumps!

## APPLICATIONS

Clients can select a part of the landscape where they feel comfortable, or which represents their current situation. One client placed himself in the river with his family split on opposing banks. This act alone opened up a

useful exploration of the reality of his home situation. Roads can be used as timelines and give the client an axis to move back and forward in time.

In a similar way to a therapist's use of 'Small World', a client can select avatars to represent people, entities, external stakeholders or sub-egos. To enable the sociometry to become visible, the avatars can be positioned anywhere in the world and face any direction. In its simplest form, a client will position a number of avatars relative to each

Management system has been designed to ensure appropriate security and confidentiality; for example, the therapist creates an individual session which can only be accessed by one client and this process, and access to the system, is password protected. Data protection and security was of critical importance in the architecture of the system.

## WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

We've noticed that young people readily engage with this approach. Early feedback gives us confidence that it will help some to overcome the potential stigma associated with talking therapies. As with any new technology, there can be resistance to working in this way for some, as they may not feel confident in their computer skills and/or may be challenged by the notion of play and story-making in a strange environment.

There is emerging evidence from the UK, Germany and the US that the use of virtual world technology tends to improve the therapist/client relationship.

other, to represent a family or organisational situation, with the closest relationships next to one another and the most distant individuals further away, thus mapping out a system.

The ways in which the world can be viewed are important as they enable perspectives on a paradigm. The design here was informed by Moreno's work and, in particular, the value in seeing the world from another's perspective to build empathy. The platform enables the client to view the world from both first and third person, thus broadening the options for perceiving. In addition the world can be viewed from a free camera; this means the client can step away from the system

and view it from above (or indeed from any angle) to gain a different perspective. The purpose of this is to encourage new thinking, inspired by fresh ways of seeing things. One client has commented on the feeling of being able to 'fly' away from self and view the world from above.

The client's world can be shared either in person, or remotely, with a therapist or coach. The remote working function enables the therapist/coach to work with clients anywhere in the world. A client world in ProReal can be saved and returned to at a later session. It can also be accessed separately by the client, should personal reflection be valued. The User

In early coaching applications using ProReal, coaches have reported their immediate and strong connection with the client's world; this has then enabled coaching interventions using the language and symbolism which the client has selected.

Early evidence from immersive virtual world technology is also of interest. In particular, the research work carried out in the US demonstrates compelling evidence that this type of technology is highly effective in supporting behavioural change. It concludes that when an individual makes a visual and visceral association with an avatar in a virtual world, this results in an increased likelihood of altering a prevalent, long-standing behaviour. Trials have focused on the ability to establish both a "current" and a "future" state for the client, thus enabling the client to associate any behavioural change with a future outcome.

The current version of ProReal includes enhancements which have been suggested by clients and coaches alike. The development path also includes several new features which



will further strengthen the functionality.

## CONCLUSION

ProReal offers a solution for those who wish to bring a new dimension to their work. More importantly, the software will allow clients to find their voice and to be able to explain their world in visual terms.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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