



The Use of Characters in e-Learning:

Learning professionals are constantly agonizing over how to gain the benefits of e-Learning, while maintaining that level of learner engagement that occurs in the classroom. One development is the use of animated characters, which can engage learners in a way that draws them into the e-Learning experience.

Immersive learning is one of the most effective learning techniques, and animated characters can help create an immersive environment. The characters, and their audio, visual and content cues need to create an experience that both engages and enhances the learning process.

Corporate training has 'latched onto' this 'avatar' tool. These avatars, computer depictions of humans, are being used increasingly as imaginary coaches, co-workers and customers in computer-based training sessions designed to help sharpen sales skills, reinforce leadership expertise or boost management prowess.

By using avatars, companies find they can combine the best parts of both face-to-face training and computer-based learning. Like other computer-based training programs, those using avatars can be cheaper and more efficient than human trainers, and deliver a more consistent message. At the same time, they offer an almost human touch that may help reinforce that message.

What is a Character Simulation?

The idea of a character simulation is to engage the learner in an experience where a "virtual person" speaks, interacts, and helps to guide the learning experience. This character could be a likeness of a real person within a company, an expert in the field, or an anonymous character with a real personality. The personality is brought to life through visual impact, choice of language, attitude, and their voice.

There are three levels in which characters can be used:

- **Peer level - Instructor or Coach:** Someone, in this case, acts like your equal and helps you thru situations.
- **Expert Instructor:** The character, in this case, is a manager, a professor or potentially a well-known expert.
- **Authority Figure:** Here, the character is the "boss."

Why Use Character Simulations?

- **Characters Motivate Learners:** One of the biggest benefits of well-designed characters is credibility. When motivating and educating, you



must exude trust that the content is correct, relevant and valuable. The fact that avatars don't tire, miss-planes, or get sick means that you can interact and be motivated on your schedule - not theirs.

- **Characters Create Interest and Fun:** Characters create interest and also inject humor – which is the number one requirement (according to computer 'gamers') – in order to bring a character 'to life.'

- **Characters can Demonstrate Soft Skills:** Characters can demonstrate behavior along with voice. This makes it a perfect tool for teaching soft skills. Research has repeatedly shown that communication is more about 'how' a message is delivered than the message itself.

- **Characters can Drive Higher Learning:** One of the biggest flaws of e-Learning programs, is their inability to engage the learner. Research shows that character based simulations drive measurably higher rates of completion, learning, retention and overall job impact.



Typical Applications for Character-Based Simulation:

Character simulations are increasingly being used within e-Learning programs. Our characters are used for:

- patient / student education
- customer service training
- customer self-service
- and communication skills training



Characters Playing a Role Within Programs:

Often characters are used within an e-Learning program in a particular section or topic. For example, characters can be used to:

- **Provide Motivational Statements:** Many training courses, open with a motivational segment about what people will gain from taking this course. Your audience will pay more attention to 'benefit statements' when they are delivered by an animated character, than when provided by text or straight audio.

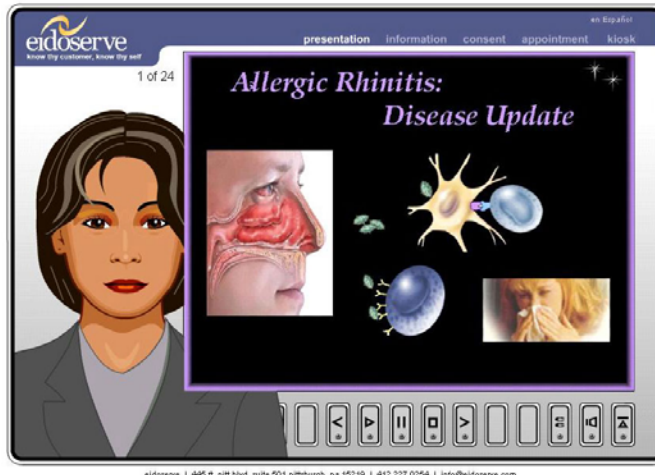




- **Guide for Personalized Learning:** Pharmaceutical companies often create programs for their representatives to take - based upon personalized roadmaps. When offering employees e-Learning programs with 'no' guide, or having an animated guide: over 80% preferred an animated guide that explained the roadmap.



- **Deliver Brief Updates:** Animated characters can quickly disseminate brief updates to their employees. Often a character is created as the company spokesperson, and this character then delivers everyday news, important notifications, or a 'message of the week' from the executives.





- Make Dry Material Interesting: Often the purpose of the character is to build a helpful relationship with the learner. Dull material is the nemesis of many training programs. The character can allow the audience to come away with the belief that they were not only heard, but also understood.



Tips and Techniques for Character-Based Simulation

- **Create Life-Like Characters:** Be very definite about the character's clothing, style, speech, hairstyle and especially the voice. Test the character first on a target audience, prior to implementation.
- **Plan the Scenes Prior to Development:** Scenes should be developed and planned based upon 20 second increments.
- **Check for Understanding:** Delivering information without the appropriate user interactive process does not promote a learning environment. Make sure you interact with the learners – at the appropriate times, and for the right reasons.
- **Focus on the Learning Objectives:** Get to the point quickly. Don't let the product features and functions distract you from your goal. The goal of the below feature – is to teach 'men' how to make a first impression with a lady. It's often easy to get distracted, yes?



- **Pilot Test the Experience to Gather FAQ's:** In many cases, character simulations are substitutes for interactions with real people. Make sure you answer 'all' the 'normal questions' that will come up.

Conclusions:

- Character based simulations are emerging as a key approach to e-Learning. With a character-based simulation you can create excitement, stickiness, and engaging content.
- Avatar training allows for repeated reinforcement – without penalty.
- The avatar coach has a 'face' you can remember, and that makes it easier for trainees to remember the knowledge.
- When compared with in-person training, avatar training can be quicker and less expensive -- especially on big jobs.
- Once an avatar-based course is developed, it can be easily modified to evolve along with an organization or work force's profile.
- Avatars can be of any race or age, which can be to your advantage. After all, trainers whose age and race reflect those of their trainees will usually achieve better results.
- Avatars also don't tire nor do they care what time it is. This gives the trainees the option to replay situations whenever and wherever they want.

Resistance to avatars and e-Learning is waning, given an increasing percentage of the work force has now grown up with computer games that often involve elaborate simulations of human behavior and environments.

