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Editors' Corner

Virtual Worlds as educational experience:

Living and learning in interesting times

By B. Stephen Carpenter, Texas A&M University

The limits of Second Life as a virtual environment for engaging educators and learners as active participants in the educational experience rather than passive recipients of someone else's pre-constructed curricula are confined to the users themselves. For the past two years, I have been one of those educators who has been using Second Life as a context to merge the theoretical and practical aspects of computer technology and social learning methodologies primarily through a course focused on exploring contemporary visual culture. In these experiences, learners explore this virtual world through the perspective of their avatars as they seek to interpret their real world experiences through the digital lens of their virtual existence. Second Life as virtual world thus becomes a lived learning experience and a means of reflection on that learning experience. We live in interesting times.

Among the key features of Second Life as a persistent environment is its claim that everything one encounters is created by its users. Such claims are rarely among the characteristics of typical learning environments where lesson objectives, unit goals, and other formative and summative outcomes are governed by predetermined curricula as mandated from school, district, state, or national levels. What the uninitiated may not realize—myself included in my early days as a user—is that Second Life and other virtual worlds are more than the pixels, scripts, or virtual locations. Second Life and other virtual worlds are themselves experiences. When they become the site for pedagogical exploration and application, they become educational experiences and therefore, by definition, become curricula. That said, the educational experiences of virtual worlds do not exist inherently within these worlds but rather within the ways in which the users engage their ideas within these worlds. Therefore, the curricula of virtual worlds includes what happens as well as when, how, with whom, and why. The contributors to this issue of *The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* provide vivid examples of some of the most engaging, experimental, and effective virtual world curricula today.

While some users of Second Life replicate options, practices, and expectations of real life education, this and other virtual worlds never expect users to do so. One must remember that

Second Life—and most virtual worlds like it—was not designed initially to be a virtual environment for educational purposes but rather as an experiment in virtual culture, virtual society, and virtual worlds. The contributions to this issue of the journal would have us think otherwise—but in a good way—as they present numerous variations on how they, their colleagues, and their students have used this digital technology medium as educators to advance, question, enrich, extend, trouble, mirror, and complicate the possibilities of virtual worlds in the hands of educators.

Contemporary virtual world technology is comprised of more than the computer software and hardware that enables numerous users to simultaneously share, compare, and construct new knowledge, information, and experiences. The virtual world technologies we have become familiar with over the past few years also enable users to invent and reinvent what those worlds can be and how they are used. Whether for the purposes of playing games, constructing simulations, or expanding the possibilities of how, what, who, and when we teach, contemporary virtual world technology also brings new ways to consider the parallels between social networks and social learning environments. That is, with synchronous and asynchronous access to users from around the world at any time of the day or night, virtual world educators and learners expand the range of whom they include as co-learners within the context of any given educational experience. Further, online virtual worlds may be the most expansive form of social communication media in which users share information and simultaneously consider its limits. In the context of education, this means that educators and learners are constantly shaping and redefining not simply what, when, where, and how education *could be* but rather *how it is* at now.

I extend my sincere thanks to my co-editors Kenneth Lim and Leslie Jarmon for sharing the experience of working together on this issue of the journal. Our work, like Second Life and other virtual worlds, was an ever-expanding and interconnected collaborative experience that combined online and real world narratives. From my perspective, what we have as a result is an issue of *The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* that seeks to accomplish is to present a set of articles from a wide range of pedagogical practices and disciplinary fields that offer empirical real (virtual) world examples of how teaching and learning happen in online virtual world environments. Simply, the contributors offer a collective response to a larger but general question of what really happens in virtual learning environments. The two “think pieces” by James Gee and Pamela G. Taylor assist in locating the collection of articles within a philosophical and epistemological context of “what if” and “what next” and “why not.” The contributions by Gee and Taylor enable the collection to do more than serve as a snapshot of some of the very best examples of what is being accomplished in education in virtual worlds. These “think pieces” place us in an intellectual context to better consider the examples illustrated in the articles, a context not dissimilar to how education in virtual worlds themselves encourage educators to question what is possible in real world contexts given their experience in virtual ones. May we live in interesting times, indeed.

Keywords: contemporary virtual world; curricula; educational experience; Second Life.

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