Annotated bibliography of research on virtual world teaching


The presentation team is composed of the “professor, instructional technologist, and graduate student” sharing their experiences in a graduate level course reformatted using Second Life. That the three roles mentioned, from design to delivery and reception, offers a level of authority to their collective perspective that single authors/presenters or those coming from only one aspect of the design process can not normally claim. The primary focus of the presentation was to answer the question “Why incorporate Virtual Worlds in a Humanities class?” The presenters describe their experience using Second Life as a medium for teaching according to bell hooks’ concept of “engaged pedagogy” (Teaching to Transgress, 1994: 15-19). Professor Meredith Abarca says what motivated her new formatting of her “Literatures in the Americas” course were the questions: “can immersive technologies such as Virtual Worlds enhance the critical, collaborative, and creative outcomes of a literature course? How do digital rhetorics in the context of a literature course expand and shape what is generally understood by Digital Humanities? How do immersive technologies redefine the practices of an “engaged pedagogy” for the 21st century digital citizenship?.” We learn through the course of the presentation that it was a very positive experience and very rewarding for everyone involved. The typical “learning curve” challenge of incorporating Second Life was overcome by having students first perform more basic tasks (namely to “create an altar and avatar that signified for them the meaning of the ‘Day of the Dead’”) and to utilize those skills as building blocks to the more complex. By the end of the course and entire community complete with farming, mining, and market spaces.

I am in agreement with the idea that digital literacy is a crucial skill in the 21st century. I am critical of the oft repeated term “digital citizenship” but
nonetheless appreciate this presentation as a contribution to “what is understood by Digital Humanities.” I am inspired to take the general focus on digital literacies and the use of virtual worlds in the Humanities and to see what it might look like in some of the Indigenous Politics and Alternative Futures scenarios of my Political Science work.


As co-founder of The Planetary Society with Carl Sagan and Bruce Murray, Louis Friedman would certainly be considered a valid authority on the subject of multi-planetary colonization by humans. The article takes the form of a dramatized exploration of a future multi-species human kind, focusing on two primary figures: Dr. Angela Okonjo, the “highest ranking human resident on Mars” (p. 136) and Carlos Gupta, an explorer of Europa who utilizes virtual worlds technology to do his job as a “stay-at-home explorer of other worlds” (p. 135). To my mind this is an alarmingly accurate view of what teaching (living, working) in virtual worlds is likely to shape up to. Where Friedman and so many others see nothing but rosy benefits of virtual worlds and their enabling function to space exploration and colonization to provide “an infinite vista for growth and development” (p. 135), I find myself driven further to skepticism and terror or the ignorance promoted in such narratives and real life deployments of technological advancement.

Friedman’s use of Dr. Okonjo as a rhetorical tool is telling. He uses Dr. Okonjo (an African / Nigerian name) to draw a direct and uncritical comparison to Columbus’s (genocidal) invasion of Quisqueya / Haiti / “Hispaniola” and the America’s, which he euphemistically calls the “first landing on a small Western Hemisphere island” and “the beginning of a first European settlement in North America,” with the hopes and dreams and predicted future reality of further exploration and settlement (colonial invasion) into the cosmos. The colonial violence of Columbus’s “landing” is invisibilized while at the same time its continuity into the cosmos is rendered immune to charges of racism or colonialism because the first Black president of the U.S.A. promoted that expansion in the 2010 speech Friedman references (p. 135) and the overall speech about the great accomplishments of Martian colonization is being given by the highest ranking member who is also of African descent. Then, Carlos Gupta the virtual worlds explorer with apparently Indian and Latina/o ancestry, is used as a device to instruct the reader on the wonders of virtual worlds as tools of space exploration.
The main problem with all of this in my mind is it is another repeat of Manifest Destiny, infinite room for growth and development in space, without any attention to critique the very same technologies that are at the cause of most of the planetary crises that Friedman claims to be escaping. Just as the empires of the “old world” failed to resolve their problems at home through self-critique and readjusting their intra-societal economic and social relations and their modes of relating to the earth, Friedman represents very succinctly with this article the same lack of will to confront those issues as Empire Earth and erroneously images that solutions are to be found in space. I am inspired by this article to create a virtual world learning environment that contains the very future that Friedman describes along with some key additions. Perhaps a roleplay scenario where some students could have the prestigious jobs of Dr. Okonjo and Carlos Gupta while others are forced to live unemployed, in prison, and/or working in the mines and low wage service industries and factories that enable those same high-status positions. Perhaps it could also be possible to create virtual world representations of what it is like to experience the colonization Friedman writes about from the perspective of the planetary bodies and elements themselves. Also see Alabama Shakes - Sound & Color.


Marsh offers us a general introduction to “slow serious games” and their value for getting us to “slow down” in the overly fast paced modern world and particularly their value for teaching the necessity for and motivating ecological interventions. After a general introduction to the concepts involved and a brief presentation of existing slow movement artworks/artifacts and games—namely Vesper.5, The Drift Table, A Slow Year, Minecraft, Limbo, The Night Journey, and Osmose— Marsh then walks us through the design and evaluation of “The Reef Game” which he formed a part of the team for. He reports the game as a great success in affecting desired reactions and presumably future behaviors. All or some of the design principles he lays out in the article behind the success of the game can be applied to other games and non-game virtual world environment activities and have been included here at length for future ease of reference:

1. Slow interaction/gameplay can be used as an alternative to the usual fast interaction and gameplay and hyper attention, through the removal of attention demanding activities and gameplay with an aim to open opportunities for thinking and reflection
2. Slow interaction and gameplay mixed with fast interaction and gameplay are mechanisms to vary actions between those that are attention demanding and those that free the mind. So provide a device to shift experience between hyper and excited, to calm and relaxed.

3. Design should be an appropriate blend between positive “fun” experience and “serious experience”

4. Satisfy purpose through interaction/play with the system, topic, issues under observation

5. Narrative and story unfolds through interaction/gameplay

6. No/minimal non-interactive cut-scenes used/permit

7. No commentary/narration used/permit

8. No extra information or text boxes displayed during gameplay

9. All information, messages, and arguments are provided through gameplay

10. Any supporting information is provided after gameplay or during paused gameplay and selected by player

11. Wherever possible, no points or extra rewards (badges, credits, money) or motivational elements that are additional to, or deviating from, the purpose are provided

(p. 50)


Pellas and Kazanidis present their study of Second Life learning outcomes. The purpose of the study was to compare the outcomes of students enrolled in “blended” classes with the outcomes of students enrolled in a purely “online” courses. The authors off a powerful literature review and quantitative data in the study however the significance of the validity of their findings are questionable at best. In their own words “...graduate students may have previous experiences in online courses and this may help them to be reconciled with this method” (p. 461). Beyond that observation it is also worth noting that graduate students in general as a student population are more committed to their education and that may be an additional explanatory factor in differential levels of engagement. The authors’ listing of “educational-practical implications” includes that Second Life can simultaneously service students who live near and far, increase economic efficiency, “provide a better understanding of the added value of VWs for constructive-collaborative activities and 3D visual prototyping processes,” and that it provides a “plethora” of possibilities for e-Education while presenting
many new challenges that need further exploration (p. 462). The section on limitations of the study states that the findings are not applicable beyond the institution where it took place, that the voluntary sample size was a major limiting factor, and that student characteristics may vary at other universities (p. 462). The “Future work” section indicates that future research should focus on “usable authoring tools for instructors to better monitoring the learning process” and “best design collaborative practices for rethinking the innovative approach in order to reinforce instructors’ continuing professional development” (p. 462). I did not find this article to be of any value as a resource on virtual world teaching. I expected it would be an argument for the superiority of Second Life and online teaching, which it appears to be with rather weak evidence. I do not disagree with the benefits of virtual world teaching but I do not see this as offering any unique contributions to the field. It seems the authors were attempting to fill a general need in scholarship to justify the usefulness of expanding online education which I remain ambivalent about and see as a double-edged sword. In any case I am inspired by this article to create a virtual world scenario depicting a campus-less online world ... what might that look like in a virtual world? I am similarly inspired to show case the values of face to face education and general explore these themes in virtual world teaching.


Pullen provides an extensive analysis of Skawennati’s Timetraveller ™ and its use as a decolonal activity. As a PhD candidate in Communications Studies at Concordia University in Quebec, Canada—the University which houses Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) and AbTeC Island—she is well attuned to the series and thus qualified to speak on the subject. In the article Pullen introduces us to machinima, or making films in virtual worlds, and shows the various ways that Skawennati’s Skawennati’s Timetraveller ™ does decolonial work by drawing on the works of various decolonial theorists, personal communications with Skawennati, and her own analysis. Some key authors Pullen draws on in this interpretive work include: Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Walter Mignolo, Homi Bhabha, Aníbal Quijano, Edward Said, and Donna Haraway among others. After pointing out the declining sociability in online environments referred to by Skawennati and that AbTeC Island has to be closed off during filming, Pullen ends with the following question “Will these virtual
territories become overcrowded and hostile, or will artists like Skawennati be able to reconcile with this amorphous never-ending space and continue to explore the potential of the medium with an ever-expanding virtual public, in new and exciting ways?” (p. 248). That seems an important caution to note when attempting to design virtual world learning/teaching scenarios in general, but especially for decolonial purposes where apparently cyberspace is not necessarily any safer than the physical realm. On a more positive tip though, there are at least two major innovations that can be applied from the example of *Timetraveller™* to other virtual world teaching contexts. The first is to have virtual world learning community participants (not necessarily students) collaborate on making their own machinima as a project. The other is the value of identity exploration, pluriversality and pluralistic identity and the imaginative and psychological advantages that it has to offer many individuals and communities, Indigenous and otherwise.