

The Shipwrecked Shore and Other Metaphors: what we can learn from occupation of, and representations in, virtual worlds

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Introduction

“Cyberspace opens the possibility of identity play, but it is very serious play.”
(Turkle, 1999:648)

Billinghurst and Dünser (2012) state that augmented reality supports the understanding of complex phenomena by providing unique visual and interactive experiences that combine real and virtual information and help communicate abstract problems to learners. With educational paradigms shifting to include ‘online learning, hybrid learning and collaborative learning’ (NMC2012:5); the NMC report points out that institutions that support their learners by offering affordances other than physical campuses leverage the online skills that learners bring with them to academia. Second Life is a ‘virtual world’, an electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces, where people can interact with each other and with virtual objects, and where people are represented by animated characters called avatars (Bainbridge, 2007). We wanted to investigate the pedagogic potential of these emerging technologies; and to do so, we wanted to integrate them with the curriculum (Glynn and Thorn 2011). We wanted to explore how emancipatory practice can be developed in tandem both in the physical classroom and in the 3D Virtual world of Second Life (SL). At the same time we wanted to demonstrate that far from being a remedial outpost, academic and digital literacies can be covered in dynamic and empowering ways – and as an aspect of a fast changing education model. This paper focuses on the digital elements of the course concerned.

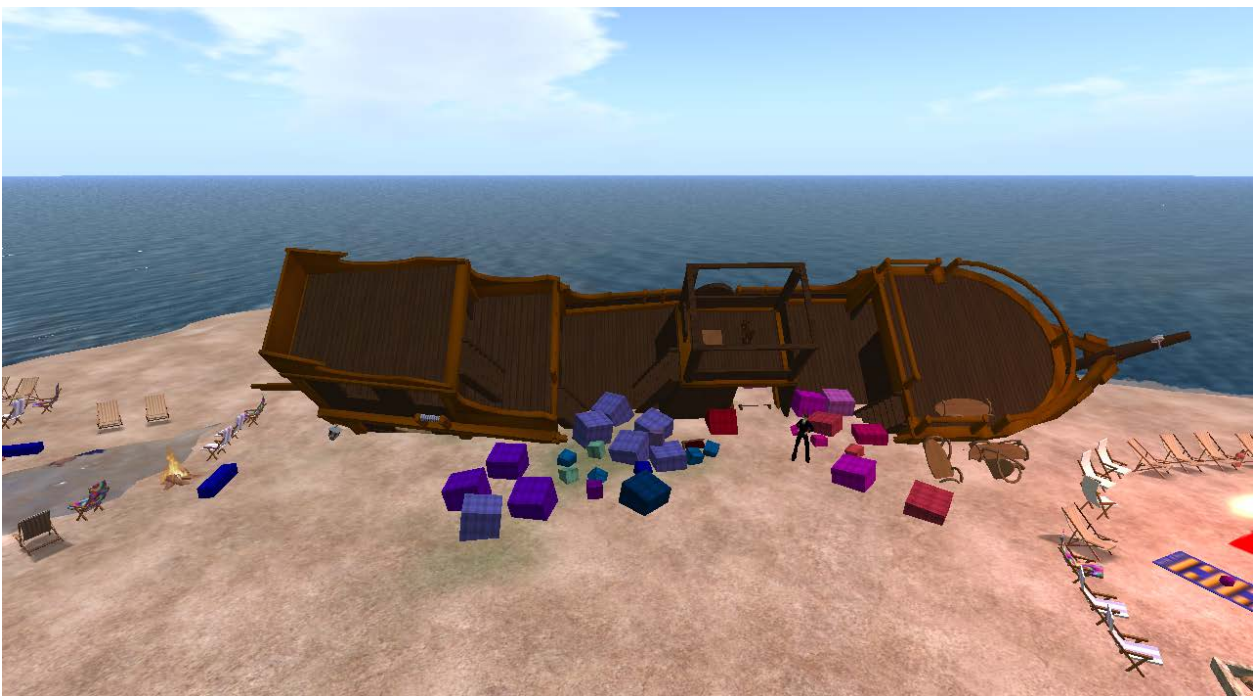
Context

The focus of the case is a first year Faculty of Life Science and Computing (FoLSC) group of students, based in Computing, and a first-year module that has embedded study and academic skills. An unfortunate perception of ‘skills’ modules can be that they have a remedial purpose: being designed to ‘fix’ deficit students as they enter the academy from non-advantaged backgrounds. In order to overcome such deficit

perceptions, Computing and Learning Development staff worked together to develop an empowering module that harnessed the best ideas and research-informed practices from both their worlds.

Both the classroom and the SL experiences were designed to enhance student engagement by being meaningful – and playful; by being authentic and engaging – and also immersive and active. Winnicott (1971) argued that play is important in counteracting the implicit threat that occurs when we are in transitional spaces – between worlds, between social classes and in alien educational settings. Dewey (1938) advocated truly active learning, valuing participation, democracy and democratic values; where cognitive engagement is matched by affective and behavioural features. Thus the students found that instead of being route marched through a series of generic ‘study skills’ type exercises - paper based or online - multiple choice quiz or drag and drop test (all designed to mend *their* deficits); they were taught empowering and active and successful study practices in the physical classroom; and in SL were invited to create their own avatars and navigate round a beach space, encountering challenges and solving problems. They were encouraged to play and actively participate in creating and inhabiting their own learning spaces – and their own learning (<http://slonthebeach.blogspot.co.uk/>).

The Case Study



The Shipwrecked Shore – and other metaphors

To explore the opportunities offered to students when they come to class in a virtual world and a differently created learning space, we created an active and reflective space in SL – that disrupted expectations and enabled ‘difference’. First,

we built reflective spaces on a beach, with a virtual sea and virtual waves washing up and down. When students fed back that this space was perhaps a little bit too empty and undefined, we built bonfires and deckchairs to enable the students to use the beach as a reflective space. To provoke active reflection on different elements of course content, we distributed various puzzle cubes about – with no instruction or explanation: students had to work in groups pooling their different talents and skills to de-code the puzzles. Students moved on to building their own spaces in SL: claiming and transforming their own places, making their own marks on the educational ‘landscape’. This is a virtual world away from a test designed to check that set learning outcomes have been met: here the social construction of meaning and knowledge was played out *through* the virtual student bodies - in participative, collective endeavour.

Our visual hermeneutics

As staff, we represented a fluid and participative knowledge-landscape not in a realist, mimetic representation of a classroom or a lecture theatre, but in the seashore, the deckchairs and the puzzles. When delivering new ‘supplies’ to our students, we shipwrecked a seventeenth century galleon on our twenty-first century beach. Arguably form and content are matched and merged conveying a message about education appropriate for the 21st Century – and for our digital worlds. In this scene, epistemology and pedagogy are disrupted: ‘grounded’ to be de-centred, disembowelled - in a postmodern playground redolent of leisure activity - deckchairs and bonfire on the beach; transected by space and time – the galleon and its bounty. This narrative tableau has potential to transform production and ‘consumption’ of education: students explore the shipwreck; they ‘salvage’ the goods; they sit around the campfire, solve puzzles and discuss their learning; they stake claims in the landscape and build their own spaces and their own objects. They become both producers and consumers of knowledge in an unbounded/bounded meaning making process.

And what of the students themselves?

We wondered if the creative use of SL space would change how our students felt about education and studying – and perhaps how they felt about themselves as learners. We used Shields’ (2004) model of Lefebvre and Soja’s Trialectic as way to explore the challenges of conventional spaces and the potential of virtual spaces. We gained a temperature reading of how students operated in these spaces by analysing how they represented themselves – the avatars they created for themselves – in this new learning environment. All students gave informed consent for us to use their avatar images for the purposes of knowledge transfer. Given that, amongst other things, our students appeared as a Klingon; a female sea captain; and a bumblebee – we argue that alternative spaces can indeed be alternatively inhabited and prove to be emancipatory and empowering as learning spaces. The relative anonymity of life

on the screen gives people the chance to express often unexplored aspects of the self (Turkle 1999:643).

If the First Space of Soja's Trialectic can be taken as our common sense understanding of physical space; Second Space becomes the rules that are attached to or are mediated by our apprehensions of the First Space. Typically, we apprehend the 'real' world as autochthonous (sprung from the earth itself) rather than 'man' and ideology made. For students, especially those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, this can refer to the typical lecture theatre and computing lab – and of how the students' 'feelings' of discomfort, of not belonging, of disempowerment - are naturalised, **with the student and not the constructed space and its power being the 'problem'**.

Third Space offers the possibilities of re-imagining space and occupying it differently. For Lefebvre, the proposition is that third space is a social morphology:

“Vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere frame, after the fashion of the frame to a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure” (Lefebvre, 2003:93-94)

Thus our case study was designed to see how students constructed themselves within the Second Life learning spaces that were offered to them – and to consider by discussion and analysis of their avatars how powerfully they occupied this space.

Mini-case one: the Sea Captain



One student built her own sailing ship in SL, not sailing on the sea, however; if you look closely you can see the grey 'stone' of a building behind her – with the sea further behind – and below. This throws up some challenges for us viewing the avatar in 'her' space. She is blond, pigtailed and in jeans: Barbie on the poop deck? And yet, the avatar is role playing 'Captain', and thus challenging possible femininities/masculinities – and the stereotype male role model - just by *being there* an (assumed) woman on the bridge of a ship. At the same time as wearing her branded tee-shirt, her reflexive device showing her links with her University, the expert institution, she is challenging and oppositional to the 'blue stocking women' from Russell Group Universities; adopting a classed, gendered position within her learning space. Here we can argue that Soja's 'Third space' produces what might best be called a cumulative trialectic that is radically open to additional otherness.

Mini-case two: the Klingon



This student had to invest time and effort to purchase and then build up the Klingon avatar over his own initial 'human' avatar. In SL he had the confidence and courage to adopt this very powerful, but very unusual, look; and one reading would be that this student built himself a strong avatar that allowed him to act powerfully within the learning environment. At the same time, there are those that might read this student's choice of avatar as oppositional to University culture, that this presented an implicit challenge to the activities that were supposed to take place in this learning space. However, this was a student who already had experience of virtual worlds through gaming and he shared this *with* his fellow students, enabling them to develop their SL building skills to their benefit on this module. This can be seen as a positive third space endeavour: as the avatar changed into the Klingon, there was an *enactment* of potentiality, that change is possible: that nothing is fixed and fluidity is a reality.

Mini-case three: the Bumblebee



“It's not easy to find a single reason why I chose that Avatar - I partly chose it because a bee is quite an out of the ordinary avatar in SL... and it's such a big, rather clumsy but at the same time beautiful bee - it's made up of a lot of complex shapes/pieces - it must have taken someone a long time to make and design it...

And it takes a long time to build up over my original avatar, so I get to appreciate the complexity every time I change into a bee, and see the transformation in slow motion (also a little bit grotesque).

When I'm flying it buzzes its wings, unlike people avatars whose arms don't really do anything.

Finally I really enjoy seeing a bee sitting in a lecture theatre for example. There is something a little bit absurd about virtual worlds, and I like to make the most of that ” Student C (Holley, Burns and Sinfield 2012)

Here we can see how the student's choice of avatar allows a different entity into the learning space. The bumblebee avatar represents a very thoughtful and controlled choice of something natural – but potentially out of place in the ‘real’ University. It also represents an additional investment of time by the student in herself and in her learning: for this construction of something that is both beautiful and clumsy and grotesque all at the same time is time-consuming. Arguably the learning space is itself transformed by the actions and choices that the student makes about herself *in* that space. A space that can be experienced as traditionally passive, controlled and controlling, with the mind and body being *acted upon*, is transformed into a space that can be used as a tool for thought and action in powerful, nuanced and quite humorous ways.

Concluding comments

The ambiguity of the virtual world is not to be ‘designed out’- instead, it ‘renders strange’ the conventions that underlie teaching, including teacher roles and student roles, classroom layout and assessment practices (Carr 2012: 13). In SL, the themes of physical and pedagogic spaces have been drawn into a new debate: what happens when we and our students leave our physical presence and start to engage with our learning in cyberspace? Our study has offered some small scale insights into this

wider debate by exploring the possibilities students may find in inhabiting a 'third space'. Our reading of our students' avatars indicates that whilst policy documents constrain funding of, recruitment to and space within Universities, particularly for non-traditional students, this can be positively disrupted – in powerful and empowering ways.

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Biographical notes

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Tom Burns, with Sandra Sinfield, has just produced the third edition of *Essential Study Skills: the complete guide to success at University* with its accompanying website <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield3e/main.htm>. He is interested in harnessing ICT for emancipatory and empowering practice, including via Second Life. Together they have built an inspiring website for staff and students - see <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/studyhub/index.html> and <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/studyhub/worries.html>.

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Debbie uses a range of innovative technologies to engage her students inside and outside the classroom. Her research interests include second life, where she is evaluating a 'mixed reality' 2D/3D logistics warehouse, web 2.0 technologies and mobile technologies. Debbie is interested in digital literacies to enhance student learning. You can follow Debbie on twitter at [@debbieholley1](https://twitter.com/debbieholley1).