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Chapter 10

Playing in a New Key, in a New World: Virtual Worlds, Millennial Writers, and 3D Composition

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ABSTRACT

In the author's courses, students have been augmentationist, not immersionist, in their approaches to using technology. In a virtual world, however, they are born with new skins into strange settings, doing things that might be impossible in the world of matter. Their frequent discomfort at this rebirth corroborates findings in two studies (Mosier, 2009; Howe & Strauss, 2000) that American "Millennials" distrust activities that seem to have no direct bearing on their educational outcomes, established social circles, or professional desires. The chapter describes assignments for such students, in the context of Rouzie's (2005) "serio-ludic" pedagogy. Several touchstones for educators appear, such as four challenges educators face, advice for orienting students' first hours in a virtual world, long-standing Second Life content of worth such as Virtual Harlem, and guidelines for creating such content oneself.

INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky (1978) held that "from the point of view of development, creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought" (p. 103). When playing imaginatively,

children lose track of time and the simulation becomes real to them. They are immersed. How, then, for older youngsters, can faculty members build or employ immersive experiences in virtual worlds that will answer Vygotsky's concern, while helping students form learning communities to promote critical thinking and imaginative play?

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We need not jam on plastic guitars with our classes to answer Vygotsky's challenge to employ a pedagogy that plays. Virtual worlds offer a rhetorically and pedagogically productive tool for bringing the neglected ideas of *ludus* and *paideia* into modern classrooms. For writers, such spaces offer the utility of the MOOs and MUDs of the 1990s, with the added benefits of larger populations of non-academics, a functioning economy of virtual cash exchangeable for real-world currencies, and more user-generated content. Of note to educators and technologists concerned about gathering data for assessment or simply showing off great work, creators can integrate three-dimensional images and interactions with text, video, and still images on self-created interactive spaces such as wikis.

Those in the field of Rhetoric and Composition have long recognized changing habits of literacy. In her Chair's address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Yancey (2004) called for a "new key" in the writing classroom as printed text shares primacy with other forms of communication. Confronted with radical change, she did not issue a jeremiad like those of Birkerts (2006) or other bibliophiles defending Gutenberg's ramparts against a Twittering horde sweeping in from the online steppes. Instead, Yancey pointed a way forward, but the exact pathway she left as a glimmering possibility in the distance.

This chapter answers Yancey's call by exploring the three steps in my students' 3D compositions: from self to other, from caution to play, and from constructed to constructor.

BACKGROUND

Crafting a playful pedagogy is as timely as it is critical for higher education. Starting at roughly the same time as Yancey's charge to educators, those of us working in virtual worlds began blazing our way into unknown territory. But where might this trailblazing lead? Our students enjoy games that range from immersive and potentially

addictive ones such as *World of Warcraft* to the lighter fare of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*. These and other games feature a set of goals and the completion of tasks, motivations to be exploited in a writing classroom. After all, the very word for school in Latin, *ludus*, also applies to games, and Ong (1981) remarks that historically curricula employed games to prepare students to follow often unwritten rules of work and civic duty. Things began to change even before Taylorist educational models took hold in the 20th Century; Huizinga (1955) sharply contrasts the ancient, and agonistic, nature of play in preindustrial societies with modernity, where time must not be wasted and "the play-element in the culture has been on the wane ever since the eighteenth century, when it was in full flower" (p. 233).

Game designers have created an opportunity to reestablish a playful pedagogy in our classrooms. Most games set out merely to entertain, but now some designers are pushing past old themes such as gaining power or harming others to situations in which a player gains "power to heal yourself from attacks based upon how many friends you had...[such a game's] goal must be something else—perhaps ensuring the overall survival of the tribe" (Koster, 2005, p. 182). Koster, a former Chief Creative Officer for Sony Online Entertainment, went on to design the short-lived virtual world *Metaplace* and the social game *Island Life* for *Facebook*, replacing the "first-person shooter" dynamic with rewards and "levels" based upon exploration, socializing, and building. This new dynamic, incorporating not the only ludic aspect of games but also the open-ended form of playfulness known as *paideia* (deWinter & Vie, 2008), may mark a new turning point in the history of play by taking it in directions that educators can use productively.

So how to we begin to enter this culture, even learn a bit that might prove useful in classes? While students—and to a lesser degree faculty—spend hours playing games and using *Facebook*, writing faculty have begun to venture into virtual worlds.

Our experiences, only a few years' old, can guide those coming in our tracks. Faculty need these paths blazed by pioneers, as our students' habits online are different enough from our own to open a new type of digital divide, one not marked by access but by habits of use (Vie, 2008).

Virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, with their already rich academic content—and, notably, the ability to create more—bring playfulness to what can be as familiar as a marketing-analysis project or, as with my students' finals, as novel as melding wikis, photos, and a created objects inside the virtual world.

Sarah Robbins, a pioneering SL educator known as Intelligirl Tully, sees the present moment in virtual worlds as a turning point when we can begin to “stop thinking about the tools all together. Start thinking about how education can best be accomplished and then find the tools to facilitate that” (Robbins, 2009). As with any new educational technology, early adopters have moved from a euphoric phase of less-than-discerning joy to consider, in more depth, both advantages and challenges. Not long before Robbins wrote those words, the EDUCAUSE group, a consortium well known among educational technologists, gave virtual worlds a digital imprimatur by upgrading a “Hot Topic” group to a “Constituent Group,” a semantic change of little linguistic import but with fortuitous consequences for those teaching in or with virtual worlds. Suddenly, they were on par with those using other educational technologies (Kelton, 2008). We seemed ready to have some fun with our students at last.

GETTING READY TO PLAY PURPOSEFULLY

How We Talk About “Fun”

After invoking the word “fun” in academic company, it's easy to imagine that our audience would react as if we'd used a different F-word.

Academic culture has long held play, including serious play, in contempt, even as pernicious to learning (Rouzie, 2005). We might attribute this to the value academia places upon *episteme* at the expense of *techne* (Boellstorff, 2008), yet *techne* lies at the center of user-created virtual worlds. Academia's ludicrous disdain for playfulness may give way to ludic curiosity, however; the emerging field of Ludology “claims that games are a unique form of cultural expression” (Castronova, 2005, p. 57). Beyond play for the sake of self-expression, however, consider a finding that “affinity for games as learning tools is an increasingly universal characteristic among those entering higher education and the workforce” (New Media Consortium, 2009, p. 5). Colleges and universities are market-driven more now than at any time in my working lifetime; if the customers want gaming in the classroom, it will come as surely as did other forms of online engagement.

As the first inklings of this change occur on campus, I have avoided the term “game” when possible and adopted a few rhetorical strategies to persuade others of the value of such teaching. There are games within virtual worlds, of course, but for most of my classes' interactions students found a “combination of real interaction and a play-like context” (Castronova, 2005, p. 69). To reduce the intensity of the arguments that “playing” might pose, we might play a language game, sliding in the term “simulation” and Rouzie's (2005) qualifying adjective, “serio-ludic.” It nicely describes the new key I wish to sound in writing classrooms, in an era of constant assessment and budgetary crises, to spur creative engagement and deepen analysis. Serio-ludic play moves Huizinga's *homo ludens* into the modern curriculum. Getting writers to hone their metacognitive skills early seems wise, and as a part of this process, play can serve as “a framework for learning to learn” (Matthews-DeNatale, 2000, p. 64).

Being playful is difficult, however, for the generation of students now in our writing classes. Howe and Strauss (2000) and Mosier (2004) found

that “Millennial” students, meaning those born since 1982, to be averse to the open-ended play and unstructured tasks of *paideia*. I’m well aware that broad generational labels can mislead, yet for the learners on my campus, mostly affluent suburban youth with very supportive and involved—even overprotective—parents, the resemblance was uncanny to the subjects of the two studies cited. For most students, even those lucky enough to have experienced many hours of unstructured play as children, the approach I propose here provides structure for a pedagogy that, often subversively, spurs imagination by granting students permission to have fun in an academic setting.

Second Life became the venue for my writing course because of the world’s well conceived large-scale social events, art exhibits, educational content, and indigenous culture of “shared symbolic meanings” unfamiliar to the newcomer (Castronova, 2005, p. 101). For faculty exploring this world, some noteworthy educational landmarks include walk-through “builds” of the House of Seven Gables, The Sistine Chapel, emergency-room simulations, virtual ecosystems and architectural sites. Virtual conferences and weekly meetings of educators offer a chance to discuss projects or pedagogy without leaving one’s office. One large creation, Virtual Harlem, simulates a once-real place: Harlem in the Jazz Age. It provides a model for a future of composition, far beyond what my classes have yet accomplished, bringing together interdisciplinary work of students, faculty, librarians, musicians, visual artists, and museum-curators. Another project that strongly encourages writers to collaborate, the Virtual Worlds Story Project, tells the fictional story of Uncle D, an HIV-positive man who lived with his illness many years and traveled the world. This project leverages the collaboration already possible on conventional Web sites such as nings, blogs, wikis, and Twitter, so for writers and artists who have explored 3D materials related to Uncle D can expand his story with their own work. This Story Quest will be, its creators note, the first of

many in what they consider to be a new genre of writing (Bell & Keltz, 2009).

As promising as those projects may sound, at the time of writing the reputation of virtual worlds is shaky. For SL, media hyperbole in 2006-2007 gave way to a great deal of negative press about virtual infidelities, cybersex, financial scams, and other sensational topics. Such cycles of hyperbole and disenchantment are not unique to virtual worlds; my dry-cleaner now tweets about starch and alterations on Twitter. Experienced SL “residents” regard 2006-7 as an era of unattainable promises by Linden Lab and incautious corporations who dashed into SL without coherent business plans (Anonymous, 2008; Glaser, 2009; Kelton, 2008). Recently a period of more cautious investment and sustainable growth has dawned for business and education in virtual worlds. The change is more profound than the Linden Lab product; dozens of virtual worlds with educational potential have emerged using the OpenSim technology derived from Second Life’s interface.

For new SLers, either faculty or students, four challenges to playing in Yancey’s “new key” can make or break the experience.

Challenge 1: The Orientation Experience

The first hour in Second Life can make or break a user’s desire to return, and for several years Linden Lab fielded complaints about the public orientation areas and non-intuitive client software. In 2010 the company released a new and supposedly more intuitive viewer for SL as well as new orientation areas. Even with these changes, students and faculty both need a more permanent “home base” while learning the basics, and groups such as the New Media Consortium (NMC) and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) have stepped forward with their own orientation areas for education.

Using these spaces does not guarantee a smooth transition to SL, since new residents can do all sorts of inappropriate things by accident, such as removing their clothing and bumping into others while learning how to move. A faculty member needs to be present. I chose to log in myself and sit beside the student, in both worlds, during our initial conference.

Challenge 2: Adult Content Meets “In Loco Parentis”

Many colleagues with an interest in SL tell me that their institutions frown upon it as a game or, more vexing, because of its adult content. Some just will not let SL through the campus firewall. SL’s makers finally changed land-zoning to move “content that is sexually explicit or intensely violent, or depicts illicit drug use” to a designated continent and required age-verification for access (Linden Lab, 2009). Yet this 18+ zone may not provide enough restrictions for some administrators. I’m lucky to work for a university permitting students to use the Internet without restriction.

Challenge 3: The Learning Curve for Creating Content

Writers seeing some of SL’s best content quickly realize that they cannot, in a single semester, match the level of building skills on display. This can be a fruitful opportunity for campus technologists to partner with the class. The students’ building roles should not be discouraged, and students might be pleased enough to create an information kiosk or poster session placed inside a classroom building, beta-test a faculty-designed simulation, or make simple buildings inside a sandbox area that would be on display for a short while. As on our campus, those who learn more advanced skills may return, as paid student helpers, to design for the next class.

As experienced as the author is with building structures and making facsimiles of arcane books

from the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft, coding these items to do something is another matter. The Linden Scripting Language (LSL) is not for the faint of heart: for the most advanced effects LSL requires if/then statements and random-number generation more akin to Javascript than HTML tagging. While some helper programs exist, as well as LSL wikis and other resources, students outside of computer science probably won’t take to scripting, even if the faculty member becomes adept enough to cut and paste scripts into objects and then modify them (my level of skill). Here again, well trained student assistants and I.T. professionals can take a project to the next level, and for the most advanced work, coders-for-hire are available in SL.

At the time of writing, the majority of content creators in SL have expressed loud dissatisfaction with the “Second Life 2” viewer, designed to make the experience easier for newcomers. This has been accomplished by deploying a more cluttered screen, so builders have very little space in which to display tool-bars, view coding windows, and manipulate 3D objects. Linden Lab will need to address this for builders such as myself, who may consider other virtual worlds not as heavily marketed as “consumer” experiences.

While no one should invest too heavily in a platform that may not persist, and that limits the ability of makers to back up their creations, the skills acquired in SL are considerable and prefigure an important way we’ll use the Internet for the foreseeable future.

Challenge 4: Hardware and Software Demands

While Linden Lab and those working with OpenSim virtual worlds offer the utility of clients for Windows, the Mac OS, and Linux, SL and OpenSim on any platform mandate a lot of RAM, a fast processor, and a high-speed connection. Exceptions may exist with careful tweaking of one’s system, a feat beyond the reach of casual users. A

result is less immersion in the simulation: herky-jerky “lag,” fewer frames per second, textures not appearing, landscape remaining gray, avatars’ feet seemingly stuck in cement. The requirements for graphics cards vex students. In every class I’ve taught, some with brand-new laptops are told when they log on that their systems do not meet minimum requirements. These technical hurdles are unlikely to endear SL or OpenSim worlds to students or most faculty.

I have run SL very well on a reasonably new Mac laptop and wireless connection, but some of my students with slightly slower PC or Mac laptops had trouble. I have found “lag” so pronounced for large events such as big meetings and the annual arts festival Burning Life that I had to switch to a hard-wired connection. And although Linden Lab has slowed the pace of mandatory upgrades to the client, in two of my four semesters a few students were orphaned by an upgrade: their personal computers no longer met the minimum requirements for SL, so they had to use high-end computers in one of our labs.

The Ways We Played in a New Key

To fully understand these challenges and the larger number of promising uses for this virtual world, I recommend that faculty spend at least a semester immersed in SL and just playing in it on their own, using a variety of computers, before even considering bringing in a class. This gives one time to see the world well and to attend educational meetings. A few hours per week “in-world” seem mandatory. Luckily, the SL client is stable enough, and “builds” good enough at most campus sites, to enable productive conferences, usually in the voice-chat interface. The experience is often as immersive, and far less expensive, than flying off to a face-to-face conference.

Once faculty feels comfortable, then more tasks appear as students begin to create avatars. As I assisted my students through the three movements of immersion in this particular virtual world, I

kept in mind both recent successes by other early adopters and the preferences of Millennial learners. This led to a series of underlying principles:

- Using carefully guided tasks that made the students co-investigators, such as linking the learning of SL skills to writing tasks that developed proficiency with analytical, academic prose
- Starting with a pragmatic look at the new technology, rather than a euphoric “brave new world” approach
- Providing one-on-one orientation by me and class mentors in-world, supplemented by later meetings of student writing groups in-world and on our brick-and-mortar campus
- Suggesting a “buddy system” for completing assignments. Students consistently found that the seeming emptiness of SL or the indifference of crowded public areas became bearable, even fun, when their avatars traveled together to complete tasks
- Giving instruction to students in a “just-in-time” manner at the time and place of their choosing, as they completed later assignments
- Building a class wiki, linked to SL content, that groups could use to present work and network with peers, other faculty, and parents
- Linking tasks to tangibles: writers not only investigated issues of gender, race, and what scholars of composition call “multiliteracies” in-world but became immersed in the task by switching races or genders and building an SL exhibit for a final project
- Inviting mentors who visited the class in-world, responded to the wiki, or helped on our campus island during an end-of-semester “opening” of the students’ architectural competition and photo essays
- Publishing selected student work outside the class to show writers that effective

writing “counted” and could reach a broader audience than their peers and professor.

These principles applied to a three-step process of playing in a new key that spanned the entire semester. Each step moved the student deeper into immersive engagement with SL’s native culture and population.

Step 1: From Self to Other

The first pedagogical movement prepares writers for the challenges to follow. While many of these principles could apply to any course encouraging multiliteracies, they also encourage immersive learning. Yet this experience, from the outside, can be off-putting to Millennials who prefer what Turkle (2008) has called the “always-on/always-on-you technology” of social networking and smart phones.

Turkle might have added “always about you” to her adjectives. This is not mere solipsism; my students use tools to manage a network of information with the self as the central node. Such a focus is what “Gwyneth Llewelyn” (2008), the avatar of a well know SL blogger, describes as “augmentationist” and Twenge (2006) had in mind for the title of her contrarian book on the culture of self esteem, *Generation me*. In virtual worlds, augmentationists extend the capacity of their real-life identities with an avatar. Curiously, it’s the culture of most academics in SL—my avatar’s profile has a Web link to my blog and notes about my university—and our students’ outside it, “the MySpace/Facebook generation which is only concerned about providing as much of their RL personality into online environments” (Llewelyn, 2008). Conversely, SL’s increased anonymity provides one reason that many students feel discomfort with the virtual world. Millennial students I have taught project and polish their real identities in dense social networks, online and in person, with people they already know. They

also accomplish specific goals difficult without technology (Vie, 2008).

To return to Llewelyn’s types of residents in virtual worlds, an “immersionist” might seek to be something impossible in her real life (such as flying) and then become that person in-world: a vampire haunted by her status and hunted by mortals, a dragon living deep beneath the earth, even Zora Neale Hurston for a class taught in Virtual Harlem. SL’s technology promotes immersion; one does not know, even with the voice interface in SL, whether or not a male avatar is a woman in reality, and non-human avatars are common. This naturally jars those students who dutifully labor to create avatars that look just like their flesh-and-blood selves. In the four courses that have used SL, my students have tended to be cautious with avatars; at least three-quarters of them chose realistic names and made avatars close to their physical appearances. Almost none of them, I’d wager, puts on a leather jacket, ripped jeans, and Chuck Taylors, then pretends to be Joey Ramone when playing *Rock Band*.

Given the innate cautiousness of Millennials, I began my classes with augmentationist rhetoric and tasks, such as asking writers to study their own uses of familiar social technologies. Inevitably, my students come to recognize Turkle’s (2008) insight that “we use always-on/always-on-you technology to play ourselves” (p. 17). This early lesson gets them past a naïve idea that moving a 3D avatar about is somehow “creepy,” one of their favored and overly general adjectives for things that don’t fit into their current social milieu. Instead, by after studying their own media habits and briefly famous news items, such as the Lonelygirl15 video blog and the disturbing 90-Day-Jane suicide hoax, my students realized that our online identities are already de-facto avatars.

Both forms of engagement—augmented and immersed—have become part of my courses. Following Rouzie’s model for serio-ludic play, I asked students to begin their analyses of the virtual world with both augmentationist practicality and

an immersionist moment of wonder. The class learned right away—and a few left for other sections after hearing this—that they would be making objects and indeed small exhibit-buildings so parents, friends, and visitors could see at the end of the term. To prime the class for the potentials for composing in and about virtual space, we screened “Watch the World,” a short film by artist Robbie Dingo (2007). Dingo created a virtual village based upon Van Gogh’s “Starry Night.” For a month the village could be toured, then Dingo dismantled it. His unabashedly sentimental film, scored with Don McLean’s “Vincent,” showed the building of his village, a work of art in its own right. Dingo was inspired by a question many art-lovers ask themselves: “Ever looked at your favorite painting and wished you could wander inside, to look at it from different perspectives?” In SL he made that desire come true for a short time; his film captures the joy of creating a new work of art that re-imagines a masterpiece from another medium. Unlike their predecessors in two classes where I began with my own naively utopian and immersionist rhetoric, more recent students have been mesmerized by Dingo’s creation. Sounded great, but the students had not yet faced any discomfort online. SL can provide that in large servings.

Step 2: From Caution to Play

The second movement in my students’ immersion, encouraging *paideia* during a graded series of assignments, has proven difficult in all four courses. SL poses a special challenge because it is neither intuitive for newcomers nor close to familiar goal-oriented games. One can, with a teleport command, move instantly from The Virtual Globe Theater to a post-apocalyptic combat area.

My approach has been to provide guidance and advice, and at times a rescue mission during writers’ fact-findings off our island. In the process, discovering what Vygotsky (1978) calls students’ “zone of proximal development” became essential.

That spot—at the edge of their “comfort zones,” to employ more overused student slang—was clear to me long before I had the writers log in to SL. We began with a wiki, following Vygotsky’s model for students working near their current level of comfort online and intellectual challenge. Wikis look familiar to those who use *Facebook*, a community of writers assembling projects (decidedly nonacademic ones), planning tasks, and providing commentary. As with *Facebook*, writers using wikis can embed other Web 2.0 objects into a page and receive responses by peers. For writers my rigorous expectations for response, which I modeled with public feedback, were at the edge of their academic experience.

Often writers struggle to find an audience that seems “real” to them, but working in a virtual world provides that instantly. The class wiki, as well as materials left in SL for visitors, expanded the reach of each group of writers beyond a closed course-management system or stack of stapled papers. As a result, faculty on e-lists or those reading my blog could “drop in” on class projects on both the 2D Web and, later, in SL. We also got occasional coverage in Wagner James Au’s *New World Notes*, probably the most widely read blog about SL. As the final projects neared completion, I included HTML links that pull up a map of the virtual world on a Web page with a “teleport now” button. By clicking, readers could send an avatar to visit a region in SL.

Before venturing anywhere, however, the writers needed to craft their personae and write about the choices they made. Their wiki entries revealed that Dingo’s film made them eager to create avatars. We discussed the steps in terms of composition. As Vie (2009) claims for her students, “the creation of a user avatar is often a complex process fraught with rhetorical power, which makes discussion of player avatars in the composition classroom especially fruitful.” Writers had to consider—carefully—how much transparency they wanted, especially when the default avatars, while generic, are all attractive.

For some this proved troubling, and it provided a first point of analysis for many writers. As a student with an avatar named Rae noted:

I saw what I had created: a tall, full lipped, doe-eyed woman, with a runway worthy body. Though looking at my avatar from a distance she looks disproportionate, her legs look too long, torso too short, head too small, and waist oddly proportioned to her shoulders. It is very difficult to create a 'realistic' looking human in this virtual world, especially after being a resident for only three days.

We discussed in class the professional implications of first names, dress, and looks. Informal posts to the blog like Rae's later became sources for the class, when writers completed a formal project that involved switching race or gender for one week.

As the class became more comfortable with the class and its technology, I gently prodded them to experiment. I gave them permission to play, often to silly ends. Then they reflected on playing during a series of focused-freewriting exercises. For example, early in the term we had a photo-safari to teach students elements of visual composition. We held it in honor of "International Talk Like a Pirate Day" on Sept. 19. A Linden-Dollar prize and a pirate's hat went to the student taking the best pirate-themed photo of an avatar and explaining why the shot was composed, keeping in mind the essential visual concepts of the Rule of Thirds and CARP: Color, Alignment, Repetition, and Proximity. Our class mentors judged the entries. To get their pictures, however, the students had to employ good search strategies using SL's search engine and maps. The idea of boarding pirate vessels, a dangerous act in reality, was only a mild and harmless transgression in SL, and the class took to the contest happily.

Such purposeful play led to bolder engagement. By the end of the semester, Rae transformed herself into a dark-skinned Indian woman who

wore a sari. This type of self-analysis, if only for a cartoonish figure on a computer screen, led many writers to consider what they liked or did not in the real-life appearances of themselves and others. If we eventually use virtual worlds for business, would superiors or business partners be put off by working alongside a dragon? Since the class met, this topic has begun to generate some business press (Booker, 2009), and articles on how to dress for virtual success will become part of the next group's get-acquainted period with SL. As Booker notes, "The whole point of interacting in a virtual space is to communicate with people in ways you never could before."

This type of disorientation mandates some gradualism for Millennials. Writing in unfamiliar terrain, they began with a familiar landmark: the self. Our rhetorical strategy, also a primary goal for the class, was to move quickly to analyze what lies beyond the self. Analysis of advertisements and marketing campaigns has long been popular in our first-year writing program. For an early project that followed the blog posts, the writers had to compare the approaches taken by two firms hawking similar products or services in SL: one that did business in the "real world," like Scion, and the other that is purely a virtual-worlds venture, like Dominus Motor Company, a maker of virtual race-cars. Every step of this 3D composition process, traveling to the virtual site, composing and taking photos, conducting interviews, and reporting results to team members, became writerly in ways scholars of composition well understand. Creation, editing, commentary, and revision remained a recursive process done in the presence of an instructor, peers, and gradually, visitors to the virtual world who mentored the writers or came to look at their work.

Getting students to venture around the large world of SL posed a challenge at first. In other experiential learning projects on our campus, students travel in a group to a location to tutor, build with Habitat for Humanity, or do other meaningful work that is part of an academic as-

signment. Even when they climb on a roof to help me nail down shingles, students have a safety net of mentors, supervisors, even caterers! That support network vanishes in SL, unless one prepares carefully. Moreover, after a lifetime of warnings by sheltering parents and teachers, students fear the stalker on the other end of the wire. To get writers to be seasoned explorers of the virtual world, a scavenger-hunt to academic SL sites without adult-rated content provided both the teamwork and sense of structure that Millennials crave. I gave small Linden-Dollar rewards to those completing small tasks, such as photographing themselves inside the Sistine Chapel and uploading snapshots to the wiki. These were not mere “fun” assignments but serio-ludic, learning-to-learn play. Each task in the scavenger hunt required skills important for later assignments: navigating the SL map, using and logging IM and chat, locating a popular spot, changing one’s appearing or clothing slightly, meeting a class mentor, conducting a short interview and posting an edited chat-log to the writer’s wiki.

Eventually, writers ventured out to virtual Dublin’s famous pub and social hangout, The Blarney Stone, where they were required to strike up a conversation. In a later class, I sent the writers directly to Burning Life. I had already been by the pub a few times and talked to its owner, who then briefed the regulars. The barflies at the pub reported that they liked the students and hoped more would come back for the live Celtic music they stream into SL every week. Burning Life, modeled on Burning Man, hosts hundreds of visitors at any one time and proved to be very popular with students comfortable with SL after their first month. They heard live music, danced, and toured 3D art installations. They reported a “gone to the fair” feeling afterward in their blogs, but again, the event was not a free-for-all. I’d toured it for two years, and I’d talked to Linden Lab’s “Rangers,” who police the event to prevent inappropriate behavior.

Millennials are said (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Mosier, 2004; Twenge, 2006) to prefer just-in-time feedback and assistance. I found that to be true, usually for matters unrelated to SL, where writers tended to be self-directed after the first few assignments. I would occasionally log on late at night to find students online, and I’d “ping” them with a hello. Other than a simple request for a landmark or explanation for a control in the SL client software, I had to do little after the first few weeks. My attention shifted to evaluating drafts and revisions.

When the students became more comfortable in a virtual world, it became time to challenge them intellectually and morally by asking them to roleplay another gender or race. Such an immersionist assignment is daring in many respects, and it illustrates perfectly the simulations virtual worlds can provide, ones difficult or impossible in flesh and blood. The “black like me” moment was a powerful one for writers like Rae, who found that when she switched from being white to dark skinned she was ignored, yet when she put a sari on her avatar, she once again attracted attention:

By wearing a Sari men were more forward by complimenting her appearance and more people were willing to engage in conversation than if I just wore regular clothing and changed Rae’s skin. By altering Rae’s race and making her clothing more feminine and ethnic Rae received more positive attention from male avatars, and this proves that race, gender, and clothing are key components in determining how people and avatars alike interact with each other.

Here Rae practiced critical-thinking skills and she experimented without too much professorial help, thus meeting a course goal for her longer projects: reasoning to a claim, rather than from one. A writer with an avatar named Deklin likewise found that his initial suspicions about becoming a black man to be unfounded:

Although the majority of Deklin's dealings with other avatars in his African American skin were quite positive, he encountered a few situations where avatars ignored [him].... I would try to enter the conversation, and the other avatars turned their backs to Deklin and continued talking amongst themselves.... Wagner James Au argues that racism and discrimination based on one's gender and skin color are just as prevalent in virtual worlds as they are in reality. Through my experiences and interactions as an avatar of a minority, I have come to realize that Au's claim is not entirely true. While stereotypes are present in Second Life, I do not believe that it is to the same extent as in the real world. (Au, 2006)

While both writers distanced the avatar from themselves by using the third person when referring to their on-screen personae, another type of immersion occurred: they saw momentarily through another set of eyes long enough to judge the validity of claims about race in virtual worlds. Thus Deklin's "I have come to realize" moment was worth its weight in gold. Instead of reaching from a sweeping and predetermined claim, Deklin used experience, an outside source, and logic to conclude that, in his experience, SL proved to be less discriminatory than the world of flesh and blood.

Student feedback, both course evaluations and responses to their work on our class wiki, revealed that the gender/race switch opened many eyes. Several final projects, involving research with printed and online sources, focused on this aspect of SL. As Donatello became "Donatella" for a while, s/he mused, "Little does the avatar I am talking with know that a 19-year-old male is behind this beautiful, female avatar." This student crafted one of the strongest projects at the end, exploring in depth a few of the psychological reasons why SL residents get emotionally attached to other avatars. Perhaps I should not have been surprised by the eagerness with which the class took to the big change. After all, one study found

Millennials to be more likely than their elders to modify their actual bodies with tattoos and piercings (Pew, 2007). Perhaps my class forged ahead with an emotionally powerful assignment because they knew they'd get attention; they were pleased by the coverage their work got in *New World Notes* (Au, 2009).

Step 3: From Constructed to Constructor

Many students have some experience here, but the construction is limited to the virtual self, not the world in which that virtual self moves. In massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) such as *World of Warcraft* players construct the avatar's persona by "leveling up," defeating evil-doers, acquiring skills and magical items. Making helpful friends to ease one's progress toward these goals becomes crucial. But that is only part of the appeal, as guilds and other groups write their own narratives, both for characters' backgrounds and their adventures together. In this serio-ludic narrative-making, two types of engagement emerge, according to Peter Ludlow, a Northwestern Professor of Philosophy. He writes here in character as his SL avatar, Urizenus Sklar:

Ludologists think that MMOs are all about play. Narratologists think that MMOs are about spinning collaborative narratives.... In Second Life those narratives have to evolve organically in the lore of places.... Good back stories have uptake -- users pick up on them, expand on them, and write them into their own narratives and game play. (Sklar, 2009)

Immersion in a world online would be far more difficult without that backstory. Single-player games or non-persistent experiences such as *Rock Band* do not lend themselves much to backstory and thus, they appeal more to the ludologists among us. As a long-time "game master" for paper-and-dice games such as *Dungeons and*

Dragons and *Call of Cthulhu*, however, I craved backstory from the moment I logged into SL. It was already a world several years old with its own legends and celebrities (coily known as “SLebrities”). The narratologist in me decided that, amid the larger world, my students should write one for our campus island. So early on, with students clamoring to make things, I told them that they’d finish the semester by writing in 3D for “Build It!”: each editing group would design and build a structure and hanging a photo-exhibit inside.

The writers had to sift through the photographs they had taken and then consider which, if any, captured a claim about using SL that seemed fair and representative of their experience during the semester. In a few cases, the writers had drawn a conclusion but needed to venture out again to get the perfect photograph. In the process, writers employed outside sources about the topic, combining that evidence with personal experience, visual imagery, several steps of prewriting and peer critique.

The photographs had to “hang” somewhere, even though they were little more than .jpgs that served as a clickable “button” to call up a Web browser with a writer’s wiki page. The writers, hearkening back to Dingo’s “Watch the World,” wanted a showcase, and each group selected an architect to approve final design-features of the group building, an archivist to post progress-reports on the wiki and collect sources from the group’s work in the library, and a project-manager to keep everyone on task and me informed about when a group needed assistance. While nothing that “went up” on our campus island resembled Dingo’s rendering of Van Gogh’s idealized Provençal village, the writers did a decent enough job to make jaws drop when visitors from the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education stopped by.

The way that the final projects came together, in something almost tangible and subject to many visitors’ and parents’ compliments, sounded just the new key in writing instruction that Yancey

wanted. I was more than a little sad that, after 5 months on display, the Build-It site had to be dismantled so we could reconfigure the land-parcels on the campus island. Luckily, the strongest projects will live on in a showcase building, where other faculty members’ classes will exhibit their SL creations. And all students will get a few sandbox areas to build whatever they wish.

There are several other collaborative projects far more sophisticated than our campus’ Build-It site. One of the finest in SL is Virtual Harlem, where work by students and professionals have created a virtual arts-and-culture district that is vibrant and useful in the classroom. I toured Virtual Harlem as part of Virtual Worlds: Best Practices in Education, a conference held within SL by Kennesaw State University. Several faculty members had collaborated to create the streetscape, and more importantly, aspects of cultural life in the vibrant African-American community. Sites for students to study include The Men in Bronze, a museum run by an archivist with the Washington University Film Archive. The site celebrates the lives of the Harlem Hellfighters, a pioneering black military unit that served with distinction in the First World War. The videos there, streamed into *Second Life*, have not been readily available to the public. But beyond studying such resources, with video and textual displays, visitors to Harlem are encouraged to play, in the sense of becoming a part of the community by dressing in period clothing, attending live jazz performances at the Cotton Club or the public parks, going to readings of poetry and fiction at the area’s bookstore, and participating with their own creations. When I attended, a group of students were in the bookstore discussing how their class had studied African-American culture and completed writing-intensive projects on display. The students clearly enjoyed the experience, one that brought Harlem of the Jazz Age to life in some eerie ways. An actor/avatar portraying Zora Neale Hurston might stroll by, meet the students, then ask about their work or, say, their reactions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

A year later, I discovered the Virtual Worlds Story Project, with its account of Uncle D, a man diagnosed as HIV positive who gets a second lease on life thanks to using protease inhibitors. The creators of the project use real-life photos, video clips, letters, and souvenirs to make Uncle D seem real. It's easy to become so immersed in his tale that some visitors to Story Book Island insist Uncle D is an actual man, even when his creators state otherwise. This helps deepen writers immersion in the fiction; they become part of the story as they write letters, poems, and artwork that gets added to an ever-growing collection of resident-made content in SL and on the creators' Ning. I went on to write a poem to Uncle D in the voice of my dead uncle—a Navy Corpsman who died, saving others, during of the Battle of Okinawa—and this piece became part of a reading on World AIDS Day that featured the work of students and faculty. At the time of writing, my students had nearly completed their work in SL so a visit to Uncle D's world was not possible, but the class had toured Virtual Harlem and found the content convincing as a recreation of a past moment in New York's cultural history.

These types of immersive experiences will, in time, become a valued part of our curricula. Before that occurs, however, the makers of virtual worlds need to overcome the challenges to widespread adoption set forth in this article. Researchers of virtual worlds, likewise, need to consider several unanswered questions.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While the work I have done may suffice for many teachers of writing-intensive classes, it may not for all academic fields or settings. Research in a few areas can shape the direction of education in current virtual worlds and the design of future ones:

- **Assessment:** how do students in classes that employ virtual worlds perform, when

their work is compared to those in similar classes with such technology? My own limited experience (we assess one student per section) shows that the writers selected randomly always scored above average in annual assessment.

- **Features:** Some areas here worth consideration would be how interface design helps or hinders student engagement in a variety of virtual worlds, how adult-rated content can or cannot co-exist with educational activities, and how educational simulations might thrive, or wither, when walled off from the rest of the virtual world, especially its artists.
- **Recruitment:** To what degree do the inherent technical and cultural challenges outlined earlier in this chapter stymie educational participation in virtual worlds?
- **Best Practices:** An conference dedicated to this theme has occurred twice within SL. What are some of the best practices for retaining student interest, holding effective meetings, and designing great assignments?

CONCLUSION

Recently I sat down to try *Rock Band* with my great-nephew Jack and his uncle Patrick. As the inexperienced old geezer among these seasoned young rockers, I was relegated to the one-button microphone. Luckily for me, the game began with The Ramone's "Blitzkrieg Bop," a song I'd memorized back when I could still slam-dance without a follow-up trip to the chiropractor. This alone saved me. Our tri-generational trio managed a nearly perfect score, and the on-screen crowd went wild. Joey, Johnny, and Dee Dee Ramone did not roll over in their graves. Jack was beaming, and he began to talk about getting a real guitar, a crossover that the maker of *Guitar Hero* claims

has been helping guitar teachers nationwide (Parker, 2009).

Jack has been getting a musical education outside of school, and when he is old enough to teach his son “Blitzkrieg Bop,” it is likely their avatars will stand on a photorealistic stage, as The Ramones, in some virtual world descended from *Second Life*.

Writing instructors and their students can and should play a role in shaping this future, and simply play productively in shaping the development for 3D spaces that permit immersive play as a means of encouraging immersed learning. A new key for composition, a three-dimensional one struck in words, images, and space, is as close as our desktops.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Augmentation / Augmentationist: Engagement that extends and transforms individuals without subjecting them to immersion.

Immersion / Immersionist: Engagement that transforms a participant so that time seems to pass quickly and the world beyond the activity seems to vanish.

Ludus / Ludic: Characteristic of games bound by rules and goals.

Millennial: Generation of Americans born starting in 1982.

Multiliteracies: Term popular in the field of rhetoric & composition to describe fluency with both text and non-textual forms of communication.

Paideia: Characteristic of imaginative and aimless play.

Serio-Ludic: Albert Rouzie's term for the type of playful experience that contains a didactic element. Serio-Ludic learning both enlightens and edifies the learner.