

Informal Learning As Performance: Toward A Hermeneutic Phenomenology Of Museum Learning In *Second Life*

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PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Digitally-mediated experiences, especially those experienced through an embodied agent such as an avatar, can offer a multiplicity of perceptions, interactions, and meanings contributing to the uniqueness of experiences in such spaces and possibly offering new perspectives and dialogues on art and education in the digital age (Ascott, 1988/2007; Coyne, 2007; Peim, 2007). Despite the proliferation of multimedia and interactive exhibits used to create engaging and personalized learning experiences in hybrid museums (Cosley et al., 2008; Hope et al., 2009), little is known on how users experience and make meaning of their avatar-mediated experiences in virtual worlds (Kenderdine, Shaw, & Kocsis, 2009; Urban, Marty, & Twidale, 2007). Given the growing presence and potential for virtual worlds as providers of museum learning experiences, it has become increasingly relevant to explore how users of *SL*, through their avatar, experience and make meaning of in-world museum learning activities and ultimately, how such experiences can transfer to actual world knowledge transformation and skill development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Central research question

•How do avid *SL* users experience and make meaning of avatar-mediated informal learning activities in virtual art museums and similar in-world cultural spaces?

Subquestions

•What is essential for *SL* users, when participating in avatar-mediated informal learning activities in virtual museum and cultural spaces, to feel a sense of visiting a place as opposed to viewing computer-generated content?

•How do virtual identities, mediated by avatars' histories and roles within a given community, influence in-world museum learning as well as actual world outcomes?

•What types of activities performed by avatars in virtual museums are perceived by *SL* users as facilitating or impeding dialogue between viewers, artifacts, and cultural institutions?

•How is the purpose and given meaning of virtual cultural institutions and their artifacts interpreted by *SL* users?

METHODOLOGY

Paradigm: Constructivist Paradigm

Definition: Meaning operates and is formed within the temporal and cultural contexts of interpreter and interpreted (Butler, 1998).

Methodology: Hermeneutic Phenomenology (informed by the works of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur).

Definition: Phenomenology is a philosophical movement, not a methodology per se. As argued by Lowes and Prowse (2001), it is therefore important to not only explicitly lay claims to philosophical affiliation, but also establish congruence between philosophical underpinnings and methods selected to collect, analyze, and interpret findings. Hermeneutical Principles for Research (adapted from Conroy, 2003) are used in this study to help ensure congruence between philosophical assumptions and practical underpinnings as well as guide decision making.

Data Collection Methods: Semi-structured interviews

DATA ANALYSIS (adapted from Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Conroy, 2003)

Stage	Steps
1. Immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Organization and iterative reading of texts •Initial thematization
2. First-order constructs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Identification of participants' verbatim expressions •Isolation of thematic statements
3. Second-order constructs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Abstractions of first-order constructs •Identification of sub-themes
4. Synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Grouping and theme elaboration •Use of hermeneutic circle to project new fore-meanings •Peer reviews
5. Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Linking of emergent themes to literature •Reconstruction of participants' interpretations into stories
6. Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Member checking and open critique •Incorporation of feedback •Presentation of final interpretation

RESULTS

S.-O. Themes	Thematic statements
Bridging the new frontier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple realities experienced simultaneously • Difficulty letting go of actual world conventions • Denigration of <i>SL</i> in the art world
New world with new materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New artistic medium with new materials • Lends itself to new experiences • Can increase audience-art interaction
Commodification of virtual culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost as significant barrier to <i>SL</i> • Corporate policies • Connection to outside grids • Cultural value of mass production
Play and imagination in the Thirdspace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspension of disbelief • Cinematic/theatrical experience • Few barriers for displaying creativity • Discovery of creativity
Embodied learning as becoming 'other'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avatar identity as defining all aspects of in-world experiences • Experiential exchange between avatar and user • Acting to accept what is 'other'
Portrait of an artist as a young avatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active collaboration between community members • Defined techniques and best practices
Performative contemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective/meditative experiences • Focus on active design to guide audience perspective and interpretation
Collective reception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is an artist • Democratic participation and involvement in all facets of the community
Transformative communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning experiences as having the potential to affect change • Rooted in social interaction and respect-based relationships



Imagination at Play in *SL*

CONCLUSIONS

SL is not for everyone. With that said, virtual worlds and future conceptualizations of the technology may never be suited for formal education, as currently defined. However, we find ourselves at a crossroad where education is changing at a rapid pace, but our perception of what education should be is not. Reliance on actual world learning and teaching pedagogies in virtual worlds and to some extent, denigration of the technology in the literature and in practice, are reflective of this lack of openness to entirely new educational concepts. As explored in this study, *SL* learning experiences were described as experiential and transformational – residents learned by doing and applied this knowledge/skill/motivation to other aspects of their lives. In all cases, learning emerged from social interaction, relationships, group, and one-one-one discussions. Art mostly served as a backdrop or “beginning narrative” for imaginary performances, discussions, and self-reflection. In its present form, *SL* may be better suited for informal learning rather than to disseminate classroom learning to a wider audience, as is currently done. As Savin-Baden (2008) insinuated, perhaps the advent of virtual technologies will necessitate a re-definition of our present concept of what it means to learn.

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