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Can we move beyond visual metaphors?

Virtual world provocations and Second Life

By Pamela G. Taylor, Virginia Commonwealth University

Abstract

Is it possible for the human beings, who are the driving forces behind virtual worlds and the avatars that inhabit them, to move beyond real life metaphors? What does this sort of questioning mean for teaching and learning in virtual worlds?

Keywords: metaphor; Second Life; avatar; art; education.

Can we move beyond visual metaphors?

Virtual world provocations and Second Life

By Pamela G. Taylor, Virginia Commonwealth University

Visual metaphors drive such virtual worlds as Second Life (SL). They define how virtual avatars look and move, where they go, and what they do. Visual metaphors makeup virtual spaces as well — be they naturalistic with scripted images of trees and water or built/textured/shaped environments portraying skyscrapers, doors, windows, or roads. Simply put, visual metaphors serve as virtual world guideposts. They make us comfortable and provide an identifiable foundation from which to build experiences, relationships, and places in the often foreign and frightening land inside the computer.

But, at what point in our lives, learning, and/or experiences do we cease needing these kinds of metaphors in order to exist in virtual worlds? What would happen if we moved beyond these virtual metaphors and no longer needed to rely on what we know and what is comforting to maneuver, live, play, and learn in a virtual world?

Let's step back for a moment to 2002 when I first encountered the notion of creating virtual beings on the computer. It was Childs's (2002) virtual gorilla project at the University of Georgia (US). When I viewed the project's web site, I was disappointed because I thought that with the adjective "virtual" came a different sort of approach or mindset for what a "gorilla" would actually look like and do. The "virtual gorilla" that I saw was an almost exact replica of a real life (RL) silver-backed gorilla. Of course, when I became aware that the purpose of the project was to help students learn about RL silver-backed gorillas, I understood. However, I then questioned the title of the project—"virtual gorilla." Because, it really was not a virtual gorilla, it was just a computer-generated animation of a silver-backed gorilla. So, what would a virtual gorilla look like? How does the adjective and/or state-of-being, described as "virtual" change/alter/affect what life looks (or should look) like?

Pete Border tied this line of thinking to education in his 2007 posting on a Second Life educators' discussion board:

I think education in Second Life needs to not just duplicate what's available in RL, but go beyond it. Sure, you must be able to hold a virtual class like a RL one (and you can do that, it's not hard), but SL has capabilities beyond RL and we should be using them. Making a building just like the one you have on campus is a good place to start, but SL can go much, much farther than that. Streaming video of someone lecturing into the SL lecture hall is certainly doable, and rather technically impressive, but how effective is it? Will it hold people's interest after the gee-whiz has worn off? Lectures don't work very well in real-life, and they probably won't be any better in a virtual world. So what can Second Life do that's better than Real Life? (para. 1).

We may challenge our students that different-for-the-sake-of-different rarely achieves a better result in teaching, learning, or making art. Simply using "different" online teaching tools to teach in the same way (e.g., posting lectures, creating the same tests, asking the same questions) as we do in face-to-face classes only provides convenience when indeed we know that

so much more should be possible with this exciting medium. To better deal with the question of what virtual worlds can help us do **better** than real life, perhaps we should attempt to answer another. What does the virtual help us do that we **cannot** do in RL?

Throughout my career as an artist and educator, I feel plagued with the limitations of tactile media (i.e., clay, paper, paint, glue). Such issues as paint drying too fast or too slowly or the weight of clay causing a vessel to collapse do not exist in the virtual world. Although gravity appears to have an effect on our avatars, it does not apply to the objects that we build, making it possible to stand an elephant on a needle or hover an entire landmass in the air.

Virtual worlds make possible, practical, and without real life repercussions the visual personification of our multiple identities. In fact, avatars act as agents of identity. Teleporting allows our avatars to travel across great distances in space in a matter of seconds (depending on the speed of our internet connection and/or traffic on the virtual world site). Avatars have few human limitations. Besides flying, dancing for days, and recovering from any contortion, avatars typically show no physical signs of age, hunger, exhaustion, or injury (despite those purposefully programmed or as a result of connection issues).

On the virtual surface of Second Life, economic, social class, gender, and racial issues appear muted by the interface. Although the majority of the avatars I know possess human skin colors and forms, the software allows non-human forms, multiple skin colors and textures, the possibility of clones, and multiple accounts. I, for example have two avatars—one female and one male, both with green skin. One of my students has a robot avatar and another has a dog. The ability to show roles such as land-owner and member above an avatar's head does scream of class division as does the way we choose to dress our avatars. Although one may find many free clothing options, buying designer and cutting edge clothing for your avatar is very hip and compared to real life prices, such objects as Prada shoes are considered very affordable with Linden dollars.



Figure 1. Although the majority of the avatars I know possess human skin colors and forms, the software allows non-human forms, multiple skin colors and textures, the possibility of clones, and multiple accounts. I, for example have two avatars—one female and one male, both with green skin.



Figure 2. The ability to show roles such as land owner and member above an avatar's head does scream of class division.

These few (of many) virtual world possibilities (that are not as yet achievable in real life) are all metaphor-based. From virtual gravity to avatars' human attributes, Second Life like most virtual worlds, is so filled with recognizable digital, visual, and conceptual metaphors that little of it is in fact solely virtually-based. Like I said earlier, I understand that in order to function, most of us need some thing on which to base our experiences and growth. But, when will we begin using metaphors that are driven by and exclusively sparked by virtual worlds? I believe that until we do, our inventive approaches to working within virtual worlds are inhibited and destined to “duplicate what’s available in RL” rather than moving beyond (Border, 2007, para. 1).

So, what would some virtual world metaphors be? What would they look like? What would they sound like? Could this kind of emerging metaphorizing (learning/research) engage students to work in meaningful ways in Second Life? How do virtual worlds mediate who and what we are? What does it mean to be virtually present? What are digital signals/signs and what do they signify?

I find it excitingly frustrating and inspiring when I discover that technology provokes new language, new terminology, and new processes. One of my favorites is “remediation” which refers to our quest to “multiply our media and to erase all traces of mediation” (Bolter & Grusin, 2001, p. 5). Another “cyborg,” coined in 1960 with links to Superman, the Bionic Woman, people with pacemakers and cochlear implants has much more frightening connotations when attached directly to such mediated characters as *Lawnmower Man*, Neo (Keanu Reeves) in the *Matrix*, and the *Terminator* (Clynes & Kline). As I write this, I struggle with my own choice of words. For example, I would prefer to use “pulse” instead of “spark” or “build” when referring to the kinds of metaphors exclusive to virtual worlds or to the act of creation because when building/creating/(pulsing) in Second Life, pulses of light emanate from my avatar’s index finger. Is there a digital or virtual everyday lexicon (rather than techno programming speak)? If so, does it, like our real life language, invade our worlds outside the virtual? In other words, how can metaphorizing the virtual enhance the real? What would worlding or virtualizing mean in real life?

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