INVITED EDITORIAL PREFACE

The View From Here

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As an introduction to this special issue of the *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, this article surveys selected issues of place, space, self, and research in digital environments considering these issues. Although the virtual world sector has seen a volatile year, overall, especially in education, attitudes toward teaching and researching in digital environments are changing. Key elements of the research presented in this issue depend on the role of space, or a specific place, in a variety of virtual scenarios. In the process of observing these interactions more can be learned about the self, both digital and otherwise, and what role that may play in the learning process. The effectiveness of our digital footprint is expanding and more research is needed to continually assess and question the possible.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of educational institutions encouraging learning in digital environments, including games, simulations, and virtual worlds, is both a celebratory and a cautionary tale. Digital learning environments driven by immersion, game mechanics, or both, are extending further into academic mainstream acceptability. One example of this is the 2010 EDUCAUSE Annual Conference. Appealing primarily to upper level administrators and IT leaders in higher education, this year’s annual event featured a variety of preconference and general concurrent conference sessions on games and learning (EDUCAUSE, 2010). EDUCAUSE, the organization that coordinates the annual conference, regional conferences, and their many other activities, has had a virtual worlds constituent group, their version of a Special Interest Group, for the last four years and has just formed one for games and learning.

In the past 12 months, the virtual world industry has had its share of upheaval and uncertainty. The start of 2010 brought about the closing of several high profile virtual world grids, including Metaplace, Vivaty, and There. Between June and October, Linden Lab, developer and publisher of Second Life (c) (SL), eliminated one-third of their staff, closed their grid dedicated to the 13-17 year old population, and eliminated discounts previously provided to education and non-profit organizations. This latter item doubled what education institutions were paying as a monthly fee. Meanwhile, the open source efforts have strengthened, standards are emerging, and it seems ever more likely that distributed grids will eventually connect to form an educational metaverse.

It is an important time to be researching these topics, and our students “could benefit from educators being more open to forms of experimentation and social exploration that are generally not characteristic of educational institutions” (Ito et al., 2008, p. 2). It is im-
portant that “any research agenda should focus on usable knowledge; collective research; what works, when, for whom; more than a straightforward comparison of the innovation to standard practice” (Dede, in press) and that learning using multimedia “should be theory-based, educationally relevant, and scientifically rigorous” (Mayer & Moreno, 2010, p. 131).

Space, place, and the idea of self are some of the key elements of focus in the articles in this special edition. This introduction will explore these separately but each is important in relationship to the others and they are key components in the fruitful use of digital environments for learning (Hollins & Robbins, 2009).

SPACE

Space does not refer to a specific location but instead an environment in which something occurs. One could argue that when absorbed in a good book we transcend into a new space. There is certain credibility to this argument; however, this space is not someplace we could share with others. With a story, like Alice in Wonderland (Carroll, 1866) for instance, one’s imagination is creating the space in which the story is happening, with all its various places. This imagined space can be shared with others but it is unlikely that any two people will have the same picture in mind of what that space is like.

What does it mean for research and learning when the physical world is not the only space where presence exists? How much is a virtual space a “real” space? The examination of space, its uses for the purposes of research, and the sense of presence possible within it, can be seen in all of the articles you are about to read. These spaces provide a context and an opportunity for learning (Cheney & Bronack, 2011; Jones & Warren, 2011). The spaces in which these activities take place are important, sharable outside of our imagination, and are “impacting our abilities to influence online learners’ success” (Cheney & Bronack, 2011). They can be interactive environments that respond to each learner, individually, (Clark & Gee, 2005) and “associated with active, learner-engaged processing of learning material” (Kalyuga, 2007, p. 387).

PLACE

If space is the environment in which things occurs, place is the specific location within that environment. Whether it is a virtual tutoring center (Mason, Jean, Blair, & Glomb, 2011), the temple in the Gates of Horus (Jacobson, 2011), the pond in EcoMUVE (Metcalf, Kamarainen, Tutwiler, Grotzer, & Dede, 2011), or Richter’s CLIVE safaris and CAVES (Richter, 2011), the digital places we use to help our students learn need to be immersive, engaging, and constructivist.

The idea of ‘placeness’ is also important with regards to, and complicated by, the existing culture of where we visit. The importance of the culture of place cannot be underestimated (Steinkuhler, 2006). Just as one would not bring a class to a local town hall meeting and start lecturing to the students about civics while the meeting was in session, understanding when and how we choose to bring our students into a digital environment is equally important.

The issue of culture should not be a deterrent to those interested in teaching or researching in one of these digital environments, which can often address complex learning needs and situations that would not be possible in the non-digital classroom (Metcalf et al., 2011; Perkins et al., 2006; Renfro-Michel et al., 2010). There are many excellent examples of great uses of both place and space for learning and I was fortunate enough to be involved in one. The Theorist Project[^3], which I worked on with Dr. Edina Renfro-Michel, an Assistant Professor in the Counseling and Education Leadership Department at Montclair State University (MSU), was initiated because Dr. Renfro-Michele was interested in finding ways to help graduate students in her Counseling Theory course understand the complex issues surrounding the subject.
On the MSU College of Education and Human Services island in Second Life we designed and developed, along with several of Dr. Renfro-Michel’s graduate classes, a working classroom that also functions as a museum or library where visitors can come to learn more about counseling theories. This space has been visited regularly over the last several years, featured in a variety of conference presentations, and written about in discipline specific articles (Renfro-Michel, O’Halloran, & Delaney, 2010).

**SELF**

The questions of “self” and “identity” were discussed by researchers when MOOs and MUDs were first used for education (Turkle, 1995). Since that time, has who we ‘are’ taken on a new and engaged direction? From a pedagogical perspective, where do we draw the line between the student and the student’s avatar? (Cheney & Bronack, 2011) Is the Orc warrior Suzie or does it just “represent” Suzie? Is Darryl his virtual world avatar, which just happens to be a little cardboard box robot, or does that representation reflect who Darryl is or, perhaps, how he sees himself? (Hollins & Robbins, 2009; Clark & Dede, 2005).

When, like Dubbels, we witness the digital and non-digital space simultaneously, with the digital and non-digital student, simultaneously, how many subjects are we including as part of the ethnography? The multiple, multimodal perspectives of the same event share a tangent along the time continuum, but we are able to see two views of essentially the same event taking place in two different places. Researchers in this issue, like Dubbels and Mason et al., see strong connections between digital and non-digital environments and selves, documenting the learner’s ability to apply something learned in a virtual environment to a non-virtual experience (Hollins & Robbins, 2009; Gee, 2007).

Do ethnographic models, the cognitive type Dubbels talks about in this issue or the anthropological type Tom Boelstorff writes about in his book “Coming of Age in Second Life” (2009), address the questions of ethnographic research in a digital environment? Are we observing the person behind the avatar, the person created for the avatar, or some uncodifiable amalgam of the two? (Cheney & Bronack, 2011; Yee & Bailenson, 2007) Does it matter? If the objective is learning, and the non-digital student masters the material outlined by the learning objective, does it really matter how that learning channeled through?

Once the learning experience is internalized, the learner can then “recruit prior knowledge to bootstrap lower-level processing” (Dubbels, 2011), or scaffold any new learning on top of prior experiences. The learner is thereafter able to apply familiar schemata in situations that cannot take place easily, cheaply, or possibly, at all, thereby reducing the cognitive load. These activities can take on a form of “cognitive apprenticeship”, (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 39) such as Dubbels’ young student who takes pride in showing his friends something in the video game or the tutors being taught in a virtual environment how to tutor (Mason, et al., this issue).

Improving student engagement has been demonstrated to improve learning outcomes. Learners often report being more motivated and engaged through the use of these digital environments (Jones & Warren, 2011). This may be, in part, because of the individual experience the learner has or because of the culture of community. This digital space is generally shared, a stigmergic experience, where leaving something behind (i.e., a comment, a rating, a virtual build), can cue additional action that builds or supports the previous action (Wikipedia, n.d.), and this has “generated a new worldview of mixed communities, thereby moving from exploitation to place value on transcultural representation of self, identity, community, and culture” (Goldman, 2007, p. 28).

**LOOKING FORWARD**

In 2006, Steinkuehler and Williams asked, “Are virtual communities real communities,
or is physical proximity necessary?” (para. 1). That question is still quite relevant today, though it may have been superseded by a need to define community. Clearly community is important in both the digital and non-digital worlds. The difference is that we have a lot more experience dealing with non-digital communities than digital ones.

In the past our communities were limited by proximity, but with the digital environment, limitations have changed quite a bit (e.g., time, available technology). We are no longer restricted to just being friends with the kids next door or down the block. We no longer need to play board games only with those physically sitting in front of us. We are no longer restricted to making presentations only at conferences we can travel to or with people we have only met in person.

Now, we can have tutors from the city work with those in rural areas or educators meet from around the world to talk about important issues. We are increasingly becoming members of a more global community and it is time to look beyond even further ahead and work harder at reforming our methods and diversifying our modes of research (Goldman, 2007, p. 28).

New technological advances are aiding with this process as well as enhancing other important types of research. Looking at log files and time-stamps has helped greatly but now we can track where and what the eyes see or get more accurate pictures of what parts of the brain respond when we are engaged in different activities.

With the growth of research, funding follows. Agencies are considering, and funding, research that only a few years ago would not have gotten a second thought. The funding decisions of organizations such as the MacArthur Foundation are proof that priorities are shifting.

There are so many exciting new topics to be considered, new methodologies to be used, new collaborations to be formed, new pedagogies to be considered, and new ways to disseminate the results. However, ultimately, whatever ideas we have, methods we use, collaboratives that are formed, we need to look beyond the uniqueness of the media. We need to think beyond the question of whether digital environments change the way we think, act, or perceive the world. Now is the time to instead ask how.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 http://www.educause.edu/groups/VW
2 http://www.educause.edu/cg/gamesandlearning
3 http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Montclair%20State%20CEHSADP/74/197/23

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