Chapter 10
Playing in a New Key, in a New World:
Virtual Worlds, Millennial Writers, and 3D Composition

Joe Essid
University of Richmond, USA

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?
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.