Chapter 15

What are Avatars Made of?
Fictive Worlds and the Zone of Regulatory Development

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ABSTRACT

Interest in massively multi-protagonist online games and virtual worlds as platforms for learning has shifted of late from the realm of what might easily be perceived as geeky curiosity, to learned and formalized educational research, to an increasing number of policy-makers and school leaders making the investment in land and establishing in-world institutional presences. This chapter seeks to frame such worlds in a contemporary interpretation of socio-cultural theory, in such a way that their unique affordances for learning are foregrounded in terms of the nascent meme of the Zone of Regulatory Development. Particular consideration will also be paid to the dimensionality of such worlds, and the implications thereof to notions of identity and situativity.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Australians use the notion of ‘The Dreaming’ to refer to the time of Creation. In this construct, it is believed that before humans, animals, and plants came into being, their souls already existed in and of themselves. In this Creation mythology, when the time came for souls to acquire physicality, all but one of them became floral or faunal species, with the last one becoming human and acting as a custodian to the natural world.

The narratives associated with Indigenous Australian conceptualizations of Dreaming are therefore multi-textured with knowledge, faith, and practices that derive from the earliest un-
standings of Creation, and pervade and inform all spiritual and physical aspects of the life of Indigenous Australians. Collectively, these narratives – ‘the Dreamtime’ – demarcate the patterns of life for the Aboriginal people.

The title of this chapter is a pun on the nineteenth century nursery rhyme *What are little boys made of?* It draws its inspiration from the communally-defined existentialist notions of Dreaming, thereby alluding to the central tenet of the chapter, which is the interrogation first of the social *milieux* which form the communal substrate from which communities emerge in massively multi-protagonist online environments such as *Second Life™*, and second of the affordances of the very dimensionality of such environments to understandings of place and space.

This chapter introduces the concept of the Zone of Regulatory Development (ZRD), which can be thought of as an extension of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Briefly, the ZRD is suggested as a re-interpretation of the ZPD, in which self-regulation and metacognition are foregrounded and contextualized in terms of emergent communally-established norms and values, in both face-to-face and online patterns of interaction. The ZRD frames these continually evolving norms in terms of a Bakhtinian dialectic between the learned, the learner and the community-at-large.

One such area in which such boundary crossings are likely to become increasingly pertinent to educational research in New Media Literacies is how learners and participants in large online communities – such as those found in *Second Life™*, *World of Warcraft™* and *EVE Online™* – negotiate and mediate in self-regulatory ways between their various online personas, not only in these 3D worlds, but also between these worlds and more ‘traditional’ folksonomic communities of practice and / or interest as those which have grown around Web 2.0 services such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

In fact, the efficacious functioning of such large online communities – whose participants are geographically diverse, many of whom would be unlikely to ever have the opportunity (and inclination, perhaps) to meet face-to-face – depends to a great deal on the continual dialectics emerging within their respective ZRDs. Most recently, this understanding of individual actualisation within wider societal expectations was expressed in the words of the protagonist of James Cameron’s film *Avatar*, in which Jake Sully observes that “The Na’vi say that every person is born twice; the second time is when you earn your place among the people.”

In this way, the chapter will use the ZRD to justify the suggestion of the term ‘fictive world’ as a semantically richer substitute for the more popular ‘virtual world’. While not entirely novel (having been first introduced in the pre-web days of 1993 by Catherine F Seigel in her book *The Fictive World of Conrad Aiken: A Celebration of Consciousness*), this chapter argues for the merits of such a substitution, as well as suggests the distinction be made – both in terms of subsequent research directions and of pedagogical design – between ‘fictive worlds’ and ‘virtual environments’.

The last major thrust of this chapter is a discussion on the unique affordances inherent in the dimensionality of both fictive worlds and virtual environments for understandings of place and space. This section will make the argument that *Second Life™* (and its associated open-source Open Sim grids) in particular is a potentially powerful and affordable tool in learning about environmental science.

These various threads of this chapter are anchored to the thematic backbone of the ‘stuff’ of such worlds and environments – be the analytical lens focused on the communities within, or even the very dimensionality of the environments itself. This ‘stuff’ will be interrogated in terms of how it is co-constituted, as well as of the implied affordances for the design of learning environments.
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