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# “Literature Alive! Using Second Life to Teach American Literature”

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## Literature Alive!

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BETH RITTER-GUTH, LAURA NICOSIA, AND ELOISE PASTEUR

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In June 2008, Thomas H. Benton claimed: "The digital humanities seem to be a collective effort to use information technology to improve our understanding of the human experience." Certainly, Second Life has allowed educators in the humanities to develop environments that extend beyond the traditional classroom. Benton added: "The digital humanities is also about the merger of scholarship from multiple disciplines with new tools for computation, visualization, and communications, often to create interactive projects that can appeal to people at varied levels of interest and expertise. The digital humanities have already begun to redefine what constitutes scholarship, authority, teaching, and merit in academe."<sup>1</sup> Literature Alive! in Second Life creates immersive literary environments that have redefined the ways literature is shared in virtual environments.

### What Is Literature Alive?

Literature Alive! in Second Life (<http://literaturealive.wikispaces.com/>) was born in December 2006 as a voluntary effort and continues to exist on a voluntary basis. By working collaboratively with others, modeling virtual citizenship, and securing land grant and Linden Lab sponsors, Literature Alive! has produced over thirty literary projects in Second Life. The goals of Literature Alive! are to help faculty create ethical and immersive learning environments that provide added value to students in composition, professional writing, and literature courses; to help students use the resources of a 3D world to add to the depth and breadth of understanding literature; to foster a community of open-access educators dedicated to the sharing of teaching content; and finally, to promote a lifelong love of learning through a lifelong passion for reading. Literature Alive! has four active members: Beth Ritter-Guth (CEO), Eloise Pasteur (Educational Designer), Daliah Carter (Assistant), and Laura Nicosia.

### Project Spotlight

The Virtual Naylor project was Literature Alive's first attempt at providing an environment where students were creators. While other builds existed before this project and were immersive, the content was created by Ritter-Guth and Pasteur. In the creation of Willow Springs, Ritter-Guth, Pasteur, and Nicosia focused their efforts on how to help students become creators. Based on their collective understanding of the traditional classroom, the team set out to create an immersive environment. That is, they wanted to engage all of the senses of students, and they wanted to make them partners in learning.

Since building in 3D is not part of the course objectives, Ritter-Guth and Nicosia could not require building in Second Life. However, after reading several scholarly sources linked into the Willow Springs environment through Moodle (<http://moodle.org>) and external URLs, students were asked to perform a number of tasks by relying exclusively on referenced page numbers using MLA citation formatting. For example, students reading the novel *Mama Day* had to decide what objects needed to exist in Mama Day's house. Students used the text and told Pasteur or Ritter-Guth the page number of the reference; then the object was built or placed for them. Students were asked to find public-domain images that reflected the spirit of the text, and these were brought into Second Life by Ritter-Guth and Pasteur.

Next, Pasteur constructed a graveyard (a vital setting in the novel), and students in both Nicosia's and Ritter-Guth's classes had to use the novel to compose obituaries for the members of the protagonists' family. This required a close reading of the novel and the ability to scaffold ideas. Students scoured the island looking for a hidden grave, where they received notecards with their assigned tasks. Nicosia composed a model obituary, and students received this model to help them with their own writing. Once they wrote the obituaries, they claimed headstones in the graveyard and imported their writing onto the stones (using click-and-drag technology).

Finally, students were required to hash out the details of the island. This included reading the text and identifying objects that were crucial to its design. For example, chickens are needed for an important scene involving Cocoa's husband, George. A still is required to illustrate the wisdom of the character Buzzard. Students identified these objects, and the Literature Alive! team placed the objects.

### Elements of the Traditional Classroom

Educators, theorists, and learning specialists know that the best, deepest learning takes place in an immersive and interactive environment.<sup>2</sup> When we teach English in the traditional face-to-face environment, we strive to create surroundings conducive to developing the skills and dispositions of our discipline.<sup>3</sup> This is so whether we're teaching literature, essays, composition, poetry, or various visual literacies.

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It's no different when we are teaching literature within Second Life. The builds we use are constructed to provoke an immersive response within the student avatars as they journey through and interact with the settings culled from the texts from our courses. To facilitate immersion in an interactive environment and foster deeper learning than can be offered by a traditional class, our objectives were to

- construct settings where students can try to solve problems;
- build an environment where students can feel a sense of control over their own education;
- encourage students to work collaboratively with other learners to grapple with problems; and
- teach the text in ways that will prompt deep learning and thorough comprehension of the text and course content.

## Building for Immersion

Creating an immersive environment starts with the creation of a multi-sensory ambiance. Virtual environments allow working directly with both visual and auditory cues. The look of the buildings, ground, trees, weather, and furniture enhances immersion. Even steam and smoke can be safely and controllably manipulated. Sounds can be played, such as clucking hens, rain and wind, and a bubbling still. It is also possible to stream audio such as music or lectures from the staff. These features, when well combined, create a sense of “being there.” Consider a class enacting a talk among the men of Willow Springs around the still. An instructor could, of course, create a cardboard still and put it on a desk and ask people to act out the conversation. But in Second Life, students can walk under the trees and cluster around the still, which fizzes, bubbles, and steams as the background to their chat. Immersion is clearly enhanced in Second Life.

A little explored but often viscerally felt additional sense is created in users of Second Life. The sensation of embodiment—of moving around, of bumping into things, of seeing what is around the next corner—is made more real for most users.<sup>4</sup> Many or all of the students have the sensation of being there: they get tired if they stand too long, they feel cold and wet in the rain, and so forth. This can be extended by the use of animations in the props in Second Life. For example, in *Mama Day* there is a mention of churning butter. A butter churn with animations attached—people can sit by the churn and see their avatar churning butter—gives students a sense of actually churning butter.

We also focus on the learning while building. Some literature learning, of course, takes place from reading—indeed, as discussed earlier, we demand that the students read the text and provide references for the additional materials they want to use. However, reading is not always an immersive activity and is rarely a shared one. Asking the students to research and write obituaries for the characters in the family tree engages the students in learning—they have to read the source material to get some idea of the characters to write their obituaries—and immerses them in the environment because they add to it and have some control over what others, including their classmates, see. Students can also find or create audio and video materials, which can be streamed in to aid learning and engage other visitors in learning activities beyond simply reading.

These small, simple steps contribute greatly to the feeling of immersion for learners and visitors. For example, many homes have photographs of loved ones and pets. Having students add these small touches—appropriately referenced, of course, with pictures that they choose and cite—adds to both immersion and learning. Citing image sources is just as important as citing textual sources, and it is a valuable part of learning in any class. Immersion is aided because the different styling of frames and choice of images for the various pictures makes every home look subtly different.

## Pedagogical Questions and Assessment Concerns

As with teaching and learning in traditional, face-to-face classes, teaching literature in Second Life requires appropriate assessments (formative, summative, and experiential). The use of any cutting-edge technology must be pedagogically valid and must adhere to professional standards.

How do we measure the learning that takes place in Second Life? Until the technologies become more ubiquitous and elegant, we choose not to test or assess our students' abilities to manipulate Second Life. Instead we focus on their English skills. Consequently, we ask ourselves the following as we build for immersive, constructive learning:

- What can we do to foster intellectual, social, and personal achievement for our students?
- How do we and our students best understand the nature and progress of their learning?

In other words, how do we assess our students' learning in Second Life? Are these assessments different from those we perform in real life? If so, how do we address these differences? For the time being, our answers have been clear: English is the disciplinary focus of Literature Alive! Our students must display mastery of both the skills and the content of our field. This means that we must teach literature, essay writing, creative writing, professional writing, visual literacy and film studies, and so on. We are both a skills and a content discipline.

For measuring student learning, we focus on reading, analyzing and responding to a wide range of texts using multiple modes of student responses, including oral, experiential, visual, and written. This could be done by holding discussions in exotic places, developing a scavenger hunt, creating posters, or writing. We do not endorse the grafting of purely traditional assessments onto Second Life, but we also do not suggest throwing out the standards and practices of the academy or our discipline in willy-nilly fashion. In each build, we have attempted to create valid and authentic assessments that are appropriate for the objectives of that unit.

One such assessment was the *Mama Day* obituary task. Nicosia and Ritter-Guth used this task to assess students' learning via their written responses as they adhered to the standards established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), MLA, and our individual host institutions and departments (Montclair State University and Lehigh Carbon Community College). Students' writing samples were assessed for their exhibition of and adherence to the following:

- Standards of clear communication
- Creation and synthesis of new knowledge by the scaffolding of various schema
- Evidence of textual comprehension through close reading and collaboration with peers

- Use of MLA-style citations for textual support
- Time management and meeting of assignment deadlines

This assignment was a success—in terms of both student learning and our teaching pedagogy.

#### Notes

1. Thomas H. Benton, "Summer Camp for Digital Humanists," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 2008, <<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/06/2008062701c.htm>>.
2. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Zane L. Berge, "Multi-User Virtual Environments for Education and Training? A Critical Review of 'Second Life,'" *Educational Technology Magazine*, vol. 48, no. 3 (May-June 2008), pp. 27–31; James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Nicholas Yee, "The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games: Motivations, Emotional Investment, Relationships and Problematic Usage," in R. Schroeder and A. Axelsson, eds., *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (London: Springer-Verlag, 2006), pp. 187–207.
3. See Standard 4 in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) "National Recognition Report," <<http://www.ncte.org/documents/recognitionReportForms/NCTENationalRecognitionReport.doc>>.
4. C. Heeter, "Communication Research on Consumer VR," in Frank Biocca and Mark R. Levy, eds., *Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), pp. 191–218; D. B. Kaber, J. V. Draper, and J. M. Usher, "Influence of Individual Differences on Application Design for Individual and Collaborative Immersive Virtual Environments," in Kay M. Stanney, ed., *Handbook of Virtual Environments: Design, Implementation, and Applications* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), pp. 379–402; Ken Newman, "Albert in Africa: Online Role-Playing and Lessons from Improvisational Theatre," *Computers in Entertainment*, vol. 3, no. 3 (July 2005).



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