

Chapter 18

The Third Culture: The Transforming (Visual) Culture in Globalized Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to improve the understanding of how users of online virtual worlds learn and/or relearn 'culture' through the use of visual components. The goal of this research is to understand if culturally and historically authentic imagery is necessary for users to understand the virtual world; how virtual world residents form and reform their virtual culture; and whether the visual culture in the virtual world is imported from the real world, colonized by any dominate culture, or assimilated into a new culture. The main research question is: Is the authenticity of cultural imagery important to virtual world residents? This research investigates whether visual culture awareness can help students develop a better understanding of visual culture in the real world, and whether this awareness can help educators construct better curricula and pedagogy for visual culture education.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand how users of online virtual worlds learn and/or relearn 'culture' through the use of visual components. The goal of this study is to understand if culturally and historically authentic imagery is necessary for users to understand the virtual world by asking how virtual world residents understand other cultures in and through virtual world environments, how virtual world residents form and reform their virtual culture, as well as understanding if virtual world residents are tolerant to visual culture representation in virtual world and whether they see the visual culture in the virtual world imported from the real world, which might be colonized by any dominate culture or assimilated into a new virtual culture. I formed a main research question: how do the virtual residents respond to the authenticity of cultural imagery in the virtual world? The sub questions are: What are the visual differences between virtual world culture and real world culture? How do virtual world residents react to virtual imagery that is different from the real world environment? How do virtual world residents

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understand other cultures in and through virtual world environments? I believe that this research benefits educators by informing them of possibilities, concerns and limitations of teaching visual culture in the virtual world. This study can help students develop a better understanding of visual culture in the real world and explore whether this awareness can help educators construct better curricula and pedagogy for visual culture education.

BACKGROUND

3D animated virtual worlds such as Second Life and Open Simulator are new habitats for contemporary people (McLeod, Liu, & Axline, 2014; Wasko, Teigland, Leidner, & Jarvenpaa, 2011; Edwards, 2006). These virtual worlds do not require a storyline; users socialize, travel, and explore their creativity. Virtual worlds allow people who live in physically different places to communicate and learn from each other through the use of images, despite differences in their cultural backgrounds (Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2011; Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012). In virtual worlds, each resident has the freedom to reconstruct a real world environment, create a world inspired by science fiction, or construct an imaginary, artistic atmosphere. The virtual world provides vast possibilities for visual expression (Burnett, 2002).

Virtual world content creators come from anywhere around the world and from diverse cultural backgrounds, and visual communication among residents in the virtual world is not limited by geographic location. Thus, the mixed and matched visual imagery created in the virtual world is often more culturally complex than the visual imagery of the real world (Han, 2015; Han, 2013a; Han, 2013b). All 3D visualized virtual world images, such as costumes, architecture, and even ordinary decorations, are influenced by the cultural backgrounds of their creators. This acknowledges that images are influential, and people learn and build objects in the virtual world reflecting their own ideology or knowledge based on what they have seen and observed in real world. Therefore, it is imperative to note the importance of visual culture in virtual worlds as a reflection of real world.

In this chapter, the term authentic imagery designates imagery that respects the cultural and historical background of that imagery in real world. In virtual worlds, residents come from diverse backgrounds, and they are able to freely create any visual image. There are many Asian sites created by Westerners, and artifacts that look as if they were made by aboriginals, but these virtual places and objects have actually been appropriated by people without considering their cultural backgrounds. Within this context, authentic imagery means imagery in which the elements and symbols of that imagery follow the cultural and historical background of the culture of origin.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Visual Culture in a Virtual World

In virtual worlds, everything is visualized, and nothing can be taken for granted. Mountains, lakes, rivers, trees, and even grass are carefully planted by virtual world creators. Vision is the major sense used in virtual worlds (Dickey, 2005; Atlas & Putterman, 2011; Kaplan & Yankelovich, 2011). Without the support of other senses, residents of virtual worlds rely heavily on their vision to make sense of their

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