It’s Behind You (Oh No It Isn’t!):
Learning About Digital Authenticity From Pantomimes in
Second Life

Anna Peachey and Greg Withnail

Abstract
This paper reflects on two Christmas pantomimes performed by The Open
University informal learning community in Second Life. We explore the
skills needed to participate in the production and how learning from the first
event informed changes to the second, following Kolb’s (1975) Experiential
Learning Model of concrete experience, observation and reflection, the
formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situations.

The first pantomime was performed in December 2008. Many
traditional pantomime performance conventions were observed, however the
skills required to mediate these roles successfully in a virtual world were
different to their physical world equivalents. The cast chose to perform using
text (rather than voice), requiring them to simultaneously manage a range of
interactions with the environment.

During and after the performance we observed the level of digital
literacy and multitasking skills needed by performers, and reflected on how
to refine the process, within the limits of the environment, for the following
year’s delivery. It was observed that complex multitasking was needed to
manage all aspects of acting through avatars within the environment. An easy
but extreme solution would be to automate the production completely, using
the technology to take away all individual user interactions, but this raised
questions about the authenticity of the shared experience.

Discussions led to the formation of abstract concepts relating to the
continuum between traditional pantomime delivery and fully automated
inworld delivery, and the ‘acceptability’ limit for a genuine shared
experience between performers and audience. A device was programmed to
deliver lines as controlled by each actor, freeing participants from the need to
copy and paste but maintaining individual responsibility for timing, and this
was tested successfully in the December 2009 performance.

The value in understanding the skills needed to participate in such a
collaborative acting event, and the sense of authenticity, can be transferred to
any teaching and learning activity that uses plays and role-plays to help
students explore embedded perspectives.
It’s Behind You (Oh No It Isn’t!): Learning About Digital Authenticity From Pantomimes in Second Life

This paper is currently in draft, and restricted to 2600 words for the version to be presented at Experiential Learning in Virtual Worlds in Prague, March 2011. A full paper is to follow.

Key Words: Second Life, virtual worlds, community, pantomime, experiential learning, presence, flow, identity, automation.

*****

1. Introduction

This paper will use a framework of Kolb’s (1975) Experiential Learning Model to scaffold an account of developing understanding about multitasking and shared experience during the delivery of two Christmas pantomimes, performed by The Open University (OU) community in the virtual world Second Life® (SL).

Figure 1: The cycle of experiential learning

Although Kolb and Fry (1975) describe the experiential learning cycle as a continuous spiral that can commence at any of the four stages, our process begins with a concrete action – the production and delivery of an inworld pantomime - and reflections on the effect of this action. We consider issues of digital literacy, multitasking and shared experience, seeking to describe and explain these effects and reach a position of understanding from which we are able to predict the consequences of taking the same action again in similar circumstances. This leads to the formation of an abstract concept, understanding a general principle (of autonomy and authenticity) that indicates a connection between the same action and effects applied across a wider range of contexts but within a range of generalisation.
(Coleman 1976, p. 52). Once this concept is understood, it is applied and tested through action in a new circumstance – the next year’s panto – and we describe this experience, indicating briefly how the spiral of learning may continue.

Using the experiential learning framework, the following issues are explored:

- The range of digital literacies needed to participate in theatre in a virtual world, and to manage those skills
- The qualities that contain a ‘real’ shared experience in an environment where digital representation is privileged.

The paper concludes by considering near future issues relating to skills management in virtual worlds, with suggestions for further work in the area.

Due to the nature of our participation in the activities on which we will reflect, this paper is written collaboratively in the first person, drawing on our own experiences as well as on observations and data collected from our environment.

2. **Background**

   The Open University in the UK (OU) is a pioneer in teaching and learning in virtual worlds, and registered its first island in the open (narrative free) virtual world Second Life (SL) in June 2006. The OU’s social presence is now a large, thriving virtual community, modelled on Oldenburg’s (1991) physical world concept of Third Place (Peachey, 2008 and 2010).

   A virtual world provides The OU with a space where students can meet and interact socially in a manner rarely feasible in the physical world, overcoming some of the core challenges to the experience of distance learning.

   The OU inworld community holds a wide range of social events. In November 2008, a community member proposed and wrote the script for an inworld pantomime, the theatrical comedy particularly performed at Christmas that traditionally incorporates slapstick, cross-dressing, audience participation, mild sexual innuendo, in-jokes and topical references specific to the hosting community.

   Members of the inworld community including both staff and students took acting and administrative roles for this pantomime, Cinderella. We were pivotal within the production, guiding and supporting activities including casting, directing, building the theatre and creating/buying costumes and scenery. We also performed in cameo roles.

3. **Experiential Learning Perspective**

   The positioning of concrete experience for experimentation, combined with feedback to challenge theory and practice, is a developmental
process that links Kolb with Dewey’s theories on the act of thinking (Dewey, 1933), and with Piaget (1952) “for an appreciation of cognitive development” (Smith, 2001). However Kolb’s emphasis on experience within learning specifically distinguishes his model “from cognitive theories of the learning process” (Smith, ibid). In cognitive constructivism the focus is on interaction with content and individual construction of knowledge (Felix, 2005), whereas social constructivism focuses on interaction with people and co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The OU social community “demonstrates social constructivism through the assumption that knowledge construction is achieved by the interaction taking place within oneself through reflective thinking, and by the interaction that occurs in communications and collaboration with other people.” (Peachey, Broadribb, Carter and Westrapp, 2010). Our experience of the Second Life community has led us to privilege social theories above cognitive theories; hence we favour Kolb as a framework for our reflections.

4. Virtual Acting

One striking point about our pantomimes is that their dialogue is delivered as text. Although voice communication is possible in SL, our community members nearly always use text. Some prefer it; others have technical problems using voice in Second Life. Newcomers using voice often find they have to switch to text to join a conversation. Performing with voice would have been difficult for some, undesirable for others, and unfamiliar to most. Delivering dialogue as text was tricky. Even those who could touch type could not match the natural pace of a performance. Cast members coped initially by pasting their lines from a text file open next to the Second Life viewer.

Walking and talking simultaneously presents challenges in SL. The user controls an avatar’s movement with a keyboard and a mouse, so when the user’s fingers are busy copying and pasting dialogue, avatar movement and use of props is nearly impossible. Therefore, the first pantomime’s stage directions were minimal.

Not everything about performing inworld is harder than it would be in a traditional theatre. The timely changes of makeup and costume so challenging to a conventional actor are achieved with a couple of clicks in SL. The skill is an acquired one, but is easily learned. SL’s “Group Chat” facility proved invaluable, as the cast could privately discuss cues and

---

1 SL does allow the use of stored short character animations, but starting one would have interrupted the copy-paste rhythm, so they were not used during dialogue. “Exeunt, pursued by Prince” was about the limit.
directions without being overheard by the audience. Any user capable of text chat in SL already had the skills necessary for group chat.

5. **Observation**

The first pantomime was a success. Many visitors came and, more importantly, stayed for the whole pantomime. From the audience’s point of view the performance was slick and flawless. The truth was rather different.

Afterwards, cast members echoed what we had felt during the performance: The copy-and-paste technique, though an improvement on manual typing, was awkward and slow to execute. The resulting dialogue was (just about) rapid enough to seem natural, but the sustained effort required meant that it was all the actors could do to deliver their lines on cue. Behind the scenes the cast was in a state of extreme stress, with each member focused solely on the task of copying and pasting. The technical demands placed upon them removed them from the action and precluded a sense of immersion. The result was that the actors enjoyed the experience significantly less than the audience did.

6. **Reflection**

From the outset we knew that trying to transplant the whole job of actor into the virtual world would be unwise because of the demanding environment. Therefore, we chose to deliver dialogue with text instead of voice. However, we discovered during the performance that the copy-and-paste technique, although helpful, did not fully overcome the difficulty of maintaining a natural pace of dialogue. The audience did not comment on this, but it was a concern nonetheless: Actors pasting lines as fast as they could were only just managing to keep up. A single extra distraction or mishap would have had consequences the audience could not help but notice. The stress this induced in the cast meant that the actors’ experience was negatively affected.

People who spend time in virtual worlds often experience a sense of immersion. Engrossed in their avatar’s environment, they prioritize their presence in the virtual over their presence in the physical. Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 1982) describes the “optimal experience” or positive sensations of immersion and focus that we experience during those times when our skills are comfortably matched to the challenges we meet in everyday activities. Flow is often accompanied by a general sense of pleasure and satisfaction, and of being lost in a task.

The concept of flow is closely related to telepresence, a term used by Minsky (1980) to describe the presence or sense of ‘being there’ felt by remote operators in virtual environments, adapted from the earlier concept of teleoperation, which simply described work undertaken remotely. Telepresence has also since been defined as the “Suspension of disbelief
It’s Behind You (Oh No It Isn’t!):
Learning About Digital Authenticity From Pantomimes in Second Life

Thomas (2007) uses the word ‘metaxis’ to describe her feelings when operating as her avatar in Second Life. Metaxis is ‘the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image’ (Boal, 1995, p432). Thomas (2007) describes the experience as one where the virtual world becomes foregrounded, socially, emotionally and visually.

In staging a pantomime we were aiming for an optimal experience, an authentic immersion for both cast and audience. In learning from this experience and planning for the next, it seemed that addressing risks to the audience’s experience would also help reduce damage to the casts’ – meaning the immersion and flow for both would be enhanced. Simply put: reducing workload ought to increase pleasure.

However, pantomime is supposed to be fun. Were the whole performance automated, with programmed avatars on preset paths like the automata of a glockenspiel clock, the actors would surely not have fun. In fact, they would be redundant; they could go and sit with the audience. And, since pantomime is also about interaction, the magic would be lost – not least to those ex-actors who were aware they were watching figures more akin to assembly line robots than an amateur dramatics troupe. Clearly, too much automation could be counterproductive and adversely effect the immersion of the experience.

This analysis presents us with a model whereby authentic experience for all stakeholders must be in equilibrium between manual delivery, where the literacy of acting is too intensive, and automated delivery, where the literacy is too removed. Either extreme reduces immersion, so any solution has to address the need for balance.

7. Experimentation

Second Life’s built in programming language would allow us to program objects and avatars to almost any degree; the question about automation was not “Can we?” but “How much?” During discussions with those who had acted in the pantomime it became apparent that any means of making the delivery of dialogue easier and quicker would be welcome, short of actually taking the actors out of the loop entirely. In other words, they wanted it to be easy - allowing them to pay more attention to avatar control and simply enjoying the experience - but they also wanted to retain control. Following these discussions the Panto HUD2 was conceived.

---

2 Heads Up Device - A tool worn invisibly by an avatar that provides on-screen options for the user to execute a scripted activity, in this case
Experimental versions of the Panto HUD consisted of a panel of numbered buttons – visually identical for each actor, but delivering lines individually programmed for each. The work required of actors had the same number of main steps as before (refer to script document, then use the HUD in the SL viewer to deliver the line) but only one click per line, instead of separate copy and paste actions. However, any change to the pantomime script entailed recalling an actor’s Panto HUD for reprogramming. Later versions obviated this problem by using a separate inworld server object that contained the master script and passed lines to actors’ HUDs on cue. The final version was a single green button that would turn red and display a preview of the actor’s next line when it sensed that the line was due. Clicking the button would deliver the line into Local Chat, whereupon the button would turn green again. The plan was that actors in the second pantomime could be freed from the pressure of copying and pasting lines but still be in control of delivering those lines.

8. Discussion
The 2009 pantomime, Snow White, was a much smoother production than Cinderella. The Panto HUD allowed actors to retain control of their line delivery but freed them to widen the focus of their acting, so that avatars moved around on stage much more, and took greater advantage of animations and props. Feedback from the audience, who had a higher level of participation in this panto (oooooooh no they didn’t...), was excellent, and actors reported greater engagement with this event. We both felt the same – that although the first panto had been a tremendous buzz, we were able to indulge more in the experience of the second because the single most intense pressure (to copy and paste at the right moment) was removed.

9. Conclusions
We have described the identification of skills needed to participate in a Second Life pantomime, and how our reflections on this led to the development of a model for creating authentic experience. This abstract conceptualisation resulted in the experimentation that created a tool for influencing the next concrete experience.

As a work in progress, and limited by a restrictive word count, we hesitate to draw conclusions based on the material presented herein. In the final paper we will discuss how the value in understanding the skills needed to participate in such a collaborative event, and the sense of authenticity, can be transferred to any teaching and learning activity that uses plays and role-plays to help students explore embedded perspectives. We will also identify delivering lines of chat.
It’s Behind You (Oh No It Isn’t!):
Learning About Digital Authenticity From Pantomimes in Second Life

the limitations of our reflections, and make recommendations for future work.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Terry Di Paolo for having the brilliant idea to do a panto in the first place, and for writing an initial script that made us laugh out loud before we cut it in half by putting a big red pen through all the x-rated bits. We would also like to thank everyone who put so much time and energy into both productions, especially its stars, Eshala Tabacznyk (Cinderella) and Hatshepsut Linette (Snow White), who both deserve special mentions for their commitment to the arts.

Bibliography


---

3 Second Life names
Anna Peachey and Greg Withnail


Anna Peachey (anna@eygus.co.uk) co-owns Eygus Ltd, a learning technology solutions provider with responsibility for managing The Open University in Virtual Worlds, among other projects. She has a particular research interest in identity and communities in virtual worlds. Her avatar has wings and pink hair.

Greg Withnail is an Open University student and works for Eygus Ltd. He is responsible for managing The Open University’s main virtual world regions and enjoys creating innovative interactive content. His avatar is a raven that wears a black fedora and chain smokes. Greg rarely does either.