

Digital Storytelling in Second Life

When you read a book, you imagine and experience the world as written by the author. When you watch a film, you see and hear the world as envisioned by the director. When you visit an online 3D immersive StoryWorld environment, you enter that world. You feel what it's like to be one of the characters, to be inside the essence of the author's story. You have complete freedom to meander, pause, or experience a 3D dramatic storyline as *you* like it.

Not long ago, my work with digital storytelling collided with Peggy Sheehy's student Second Life project at Suffern Middle School in Ramapo, New York. Creativity exploded as Sheehy, Suffern's media specialist, challenged me to take digital storytelling into new forms, such as machinima (filmmaking in virtual worlds) and using Second Life for interactive stories.

The Story Prompt: Finding a Story

Inspired by Robert Frost's poem "A Road Less Traveled," we challenged students to find their own meaning beyond a literal interpretation of Frost's words using this story prompt:

Share a time when a choice you or someone else made touched your life. Then have your personal story unfold while narrating Robert Frost's poem.

Students worked in teams to develop choices with a storyline that conveyed more than a literal connection to the Frost poem. Students stretched to think deeper about his message and



Ramapo's Frost StoryWorld is housed at Atlantis Rising Campus on Eduisland.

how it spoke to them. They were asked to uncover a metaphorical visual story of their own using the larger theme of how the struggle with decisions had an impact on their lives.

Translating into 3D StoryWorlds

The traditional storyboard for translating narrative into media was quite literally too flat, so we improvised by asking students to construct a diorama that would help translate their stories into a 3D environment. We also viewed some other virtual stories we had found in Second Life. *Thursday's Fiction* and *MacBeth* especially engaged their imaginations. Filming and constructing in Second Life was thrilling for everyone, but coaching for rigorous content to develop something real in their lives was a vital

first step. Sheehy, their teachers, and I helped students recoup, recall, and detail decisions to come up with a design suitable for their storyline.

To get students to go beyond a translation of how the written plot would unfold, we challenged them to imagine every possible direction, or story path, the storyline could go. It's like drawing a map of your entire imagination before defining the various ways and interactive options any avatars entering your story would then navigate. We coached students to use visual or sound metaphors or symbolism that intuitively organized their storyline experience. We suggested that they embed unexpected experiences, a bit of magic, or unexpected surprises that richly serve the storyline while constantly asking themselves: Is the media

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decorating (distracting), illustrating (literal), or illuminating (enriching or expanding) their message or story? Asking students to find the emotional journey of their stories helped them identify the media they needed beyond topical images, sounds, and objects.

Crafting the StoryWorlds

Students at Ramapo mixed the best of all the possibilities and endless magical elements from their Second Life toolkit. With timelines tight and learning curves high, four teams of students decided to pitch their storylines to each other to choose one StoryWorld rather than doing all four. They collectively selected the storyline about making a choice to tell or not to tell on a friend who was hiding her bulimia. What would a friend do? What would you do?

Keeping tight to their storyline and storyboard, students finally settled into asking their own questions about design choices: Are we showing, not telling? How will the avatar know that? Is that what Frost really meant? What media choices could create more-illuminating experiences?

Time was running out before summer break. We also wanted to be able to share this prototype with other educators, which meant it needed to

be constructed on the main adult grid because that is a separate area from the teen grid in Second Life and they cannot be crossed. The students agreed to have adults implement their design on the main grid only if students could direct and modify it daily if needed to ensure the Frost StoryWorld was built to their specs. We had our marching orders. Sheehy called in her Second Life friends, and the students were not bashful about directing the project.

The students created six scenes. They made their own images for textures; created key movies that would be featured in the scenes; identified links to information on bulimia that visiting avatars could investigate; recorded haunting whispered voices that were triggered in specific areas; selected sound effects; requested scripting for special effects, such as floating newspapers featuring the tragedy of eating disorders; planned for feedback or participation from visiting avatars; developed two story endings; and designed a backstage area celebrating all of the contributors to their production.

Sharing What They Learned

The exhibit is housed at Atlantis Rising Campus on Eduisland via the SLURL teleport at <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Eduisland%206/39/224/21>.

I am consulting with several more StoryWorld projects using not only Second Life but other virtual worlds as well.

While sharing this StoryWorld project at our NECC 2008 conference session, Ramapo students joined us from their teen grid to reflect on their experience with the audience. When asked what they learned by a doubtful educator seeing possible distraction from the content, one student responded, "Well, for an old dead guy, Frost really got how hard it is to be a teenager these days." Ahhhh—we exhaled—they got it! It's all about communicating the story and the joy of personal expression.

What the students finally created was realistically disturbing, according to feedback from visiting avatars, including a few recovered bulimics. Students authentically and realistically unfolded a story that needed to be told.



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