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# Bodies in Place or In Place of Bodies

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# Stepping into the Virtual

An interpretation of the Curriculum Framework

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So many of the metaphors used in describing and engaging with virtual reality seem to be drawn from a Theatre/Drama glossary.

Is virtuality a contemporary alternative to drama?

## The Rationale

As more teachers and schools begin to incorporate information technology, and especially the internet, into classroom practice many are overlooking the interactive communications potential – especially the immersive forms – preferring instead to deal with it simply as an information retrieval tool. I assert that this seriously underestimates both the potential and consequence of engaging with cyberspace.

Cyberspace, with its apparent offerings of vicarious and disembodied experience, poses challenges to the field of Drama studies. Classroom drama traditionally presupposes the physical and the verbal, focussing heavily on role; in virtual reality these presuppositions are cast in a new light and demand that new questions be asked.

If Drama, as one of the “arts” subjects in schools, is to “contribute to the development of an understanding of the physical, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, social, moral and spiritual dimensions of human experience” (Curriculum Framework pp

- ? Is it “authentic” to construct a new identity on screen?
- ? Is this legitimate self-expression?
- ? Could it be “art”?
- ? To what degree is the interactivity a community building process?
- ? When I utter “I” on stage in role (character) or in RL (real life), the persona is localised in the physical entity (the body). In VR, is this still the case? From which perspective – actor, audience, character...?
- ? What about the sensory nature of descriptions in textual environments? Do we pay more attention to our sensory experience as a result of having to convey a detailed description? Improved “visualisation”?
- ? Could it be that reality “distracts” us from attending to our senses?

How might these “new” practices be manifested in a classroom situation?

**\*\* Is Drama already the “unencumbered totally immersive” virtual reality that seems to be the Holy Grail of VR developers?**

**\*\* To what degree can Drama shape the new interfaces – in what ways will Drama actually humanise technological developments?**

- ? Degrees of virtuality – what’s practical, what’s possible? What have we left to discover?



- ? What elements would need to be present in an interface that does help us to relate?
- ? What are the elements of Drama as found in cyberspace – beyond the interface, what else is present?
- ? To what extent can we engage in the process of taking pre-existing alternative representations to re-make and represent and thereby make a new representation?

- ? Do IRC and MOO environments offer some type of compensatory practice to what else exists in RL (or the classroom)?
- ? To what extent can VR be considered “incomplete” compared to RL?
- ? Is there something about textual mediation that makes the current experience unique? Will voice-activated interactions modify online encounters and change the nature of the experience?

Can students engage in the “authentic” expression and construction of a self-concept (identity), and an awareness of community, through arts practice, specifically Drama, enacted in virtual reality, which is often regarded as a simulacrum?

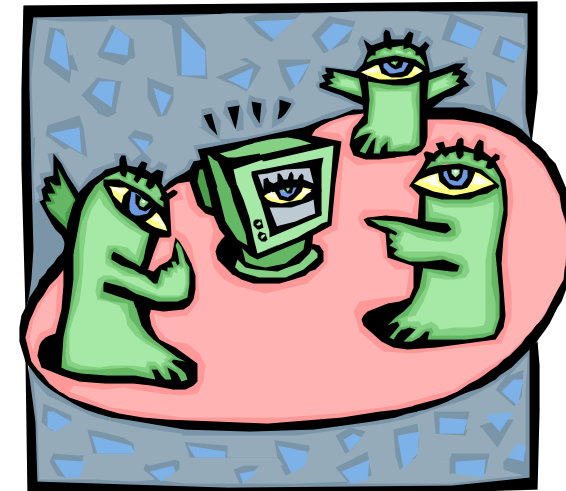
- ? Is changing your online personae “authentic”?
- ? How is it different from dramatic role-play?

50), and further if it is to “assist the expression and identity of individuals and groups through the recording and sharing of experiences and imagination” (ibid.) then **to what extent can Drama be engaged with in virtual domains?**

In discussing the role of “The Arts” in education, the Curriculum Framework asserts the following:

- ? *They [students] need to be encouraged to question existing practices and conventions and to value innovation (p 69) –*
  - ? the emergence of new environments in which to enact arts activities must offer up existing practices and conventions to be questioned and evaluated.
- ? *Students need programs that challenge them to move on: to use more challenging arts ideas, work in a new genre, style or form; develop control of a new skills [sic], technique or process; or respond to an arts work that uses unfamiliar conventions. They need the challenge of exploring a broader diversity of arts works from different times and places, comparing them, analysing and categorising them, seeing relationships and evaluating them. They are more likely to learn if existing understandings are questioned and reflected on in creative and supportive ways (p 70) –*
  - ? engaging in arts activities utilising emergent technologies, technologies that are redefining our perceptions of the world and our place in it, provides unprecedented opportunities to question and reflect upon existing understandings.
  - ? does cyberspace provide us with an opportunity to explore arts works that do not yet exist?

- ? engaging in Drama in cyberspace provides unfamiliar conventions – to begin with, physical laws need not apply, bodies and voices are optional, gender is not fixed, space becomes one of the elements we construct rather than simply that which we work in
- ? *Students have ready access to arts equipment such as paints, **computers** (emphasis added), dress-up boxes, puppets, masks, tuned and untuned percussion instruments and cameras (p 70)*
  - ? if computers are to be considered as “arts equipment” then teachers are challenged to find ways of incorporating them in the actual process of producing art works, this should probably extend beyond mundane mechanical and reproduction opportunities. Entirely new vocabularies will probably emerge that reflect the new application of this technology.
- ? *Students with disabilities should be provided with appropriate alternative ways of demonstrating the outcomes of arts programs: for example, they may need computers with appropriate software... (p 71)*
  - ? in an atmosphere of inclusivity this statement presumably refers to the special needs of **all** students – as cyberspace emerges as a significant player in our society there must be opportunities at school for students to explore its possibilities and ramifications in **all** learning areas.
- ? *Students learn not only from their teachers but also from family and community and people from other parts of the world,*



***including those accessible through technology*** (emphasis added) (p 71)

- ? A clear statement that acknowledges the expectation that students will be enabled to engage with people via technology – presumably this includes email, IRC, MUDs and MOOs, virtual worlds, internet conferencing, etc

### The Questions

To what extent can Drama in cyberspace legitimately be a site where students can develop understanding of the various “dimensions of human experience” (*the physical, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, social, moral and spiritual*)?

- ? Internet as an environment (a site for enactment). Educators currently approach the computer as a tool rather than as an environment.