

# Reflection: Teaching with Second Life

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I teach a class called “Media Genres II”, an upper-level course for students from the Media Studies and Literature concentrations in the Liberal Arts program at the Paul McGhee Division of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies. The class focuses on the history and analysis of the formal characteristics of various media (early camera, early film, early radio, TV, the Internet, video games), while reflecting on the birth of new genres of literature in response to the impact of each new medium.

## Collaborating with “Machinima”

Mechthild Schmidt, who taught the “Machinima” class, and I brought our respective courses together for collaboration during the Fall 2007 semester. Because Professor Schmidt’s class, part of the Digital Communications and Media program at McGhee, was producing a film of “Macbeth”, the Machinima class project seemed to parallel Media Genres’ focus on literature. I particularly wanted my students to analyze Second Life as a medium for reproducing a theatrical, literary piece as a “virtual film”. Because none of the Media Studies students had formal training in digital design, I hoped they could participate directly in the machinima project by writing the script, becoming the dramaturge, helping with production details, or creating voice-overs.

I had three goals in joining this project:

1. To see whether Second Life could become a platform for student projects and meetings outside of class.
2. To see whether Second Life would be a useful adjunct to online classes.
3. To continue my long interest in developing experimental, interdisciplinary projects.

I encouraged the students who signed up for my course to also sign up for Machinima, but none of them were able to fit it into their schedule, so I invited them to volunteer for the advisory roles I hoped they could fill. Because participation in the machinima project was not mandatory, they did not participate to the degree that I had hoped. Participation was especially difficult for students with inadequate home Internet connections. Furthermore, because my class had its own curriculum, focusing on history and critical analysis, the

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classwork pulled my students away from full participation in Second Life. I would likely restructure the class next time to allow for fuller participation. (See “Suggestions for Future Projects” for details.)

I also required students to “meet” with me for small group conferences in Second Life. Not all students were able to show up for these “in-world” meetings, but when we did, we found that certain voice-enabled technologies within Second Life — voice chat, for example — allowed for more spontaneous discussion than possible on other remote meeting platforms.

## Working Together

Near the beginning of the semester, to facilitate shared projects and ensure that students in both classes were familiar with Second Life, we held one joint session with the Machinima class in a computer lab. With the dedicated help of Professor Schmidt, Robyn Berland, and Robyn’s staff in the ITS Multimedia Center, the Media Studies students’ Second Life

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avatars were soon dancing around and donning wigs and costumes.

Three students volunteered to work with the Machinima class — two on script, and one on production. One of these students discovered that her home Internet connection was insufficient for an adequate connection to Second Life. The other students stayed with the project, working under the able direction of the film's director and costumes and special effects designer.

Additionally, as a project for the Media Genres class, one student, Sheryl Maynard, chose to analyze the ways the relationship of text, production, and audience in Second Life contrasted with traditional relationships as constructed in theater and film. Her goal was not to evaluate the process, but to explain it by comparing these relationships in Second Life as a medium to those in conventional theater and film. She worked periodically with the Machinima class and produced a strong analysis of the medium of Second Life.

The Machinima and Media Genres students had another plenary meeting at the end of the semester, when the Machinima students presented their amazing production of "Macbeth". Afterwards, my class discussed their analyses of the process with the students who had made the film.

Visually, the production was sumptuous. The amount of work, creativity, technical skill, bricolage, sweat, commitment, and teamwork of the Machinima students impressed the Media Genres students, many of whom had never had the opportunity to work on such a demanding creative project for a full semester. We could see that one of the most powerful experiences for the Machinima students was learning to work with others to get a creative project completed on time.

## Using Second Life in Teaching

I believe Second Life could be especially useful as an adjunct to online/on-site hybrid courses in the Liberal Arts. It could also facilitate discussion for any type of course when students are away from the classroom, and can be used for group meetings at any time.

However, such virtual participation works only when students have adequate technology at home. If they have to be on campus to be online, they would rather be

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in class. In addition, Liberal Arts students need sufficient training to ensure that they can access the Second Life "classroom" outside of class. When a class held in Second Life is made mandatory by the professor, students should be required to attend the class in Second Life.

## Suggestions for Future Projects

*If you want to learn something, read about it. If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it.*

*- Yoga philosophy*

I believe there are exciting ways to create another interdisciplinary class that would more fully integrate students in different disciplines, such as the McGhee Liberal Arts Digital Communications programs. Here are some suggestions:

- Create a single class with two registration numbers — i.e., one for Digital Communications students, and one for the Liberal Arts students.
- Require students from both classes to attend all classes and participate in all projects.
- All students would engage in both design and analytical projects. For instance, the Digital Communications students could become individual mentors teaching Liberal Arts students basic design skills, while the Liberal Arts students could lead small seminars in critical analysis of the actual creative/technological process with their peers.
- The goal for each group of students would be to work with faculty to formulate strategies for teaching other students new skills. Such a self-reflective class would reinforce both the design and the analytical skills of both groups, and at the same time, create a powerful interdisciplinary model.

An integrated special topics project would likely be more satisfying to the students, particularly in Liberal Arts programs. The teamwork that Professor Schmidt's project enabled her students to experience showed me that the more responsibility students take for their own processes, the wider the scope of their learning.