

Main, Diane: Multimedia Research Assignment #1

I had an avatar for over three years, but given a purpose in our EDTEC 700 class last semester, I had the most productive five weeks I'd ever spent in Second Life, and I had more fun there than in the entire three years leading up to it. This, combined with my early involvement with CRPGs (computer role playing games) – including Ultima Online when it first came out – made my eye go immediately to Chapter 17 on Virtual Realities by Hilary McLellan.

I focused mainly on the history of virtual realities as they developed (pages 462-471 of the chapter). I was, as most people likely are, surprised at how far back this development actually began. I noticed, but was not surprised, that defense and space – both government-funded enterprises – led the way in the development of virtual realities. I was dismayed, but again not surprised, that gaming took over this technological arena long before education started to peek into it. So now, as is so often the case, educators who seek to use systems such as Second Life or World of Warcraft with students are not taken seriously by many others, both inside and outside their profession. (Incidentally, this month's issue of *On CUE* magazine has online learning as its theme, and it includes a brief article on this very topic.)

The chapter is very thorough in its exploration and summary of how virtual realities have developed over the past fifty or so years. Where the technology has made inroads in education are those areas, such as medical training and operating machinery, where being immersed in a fictional alternative reality might be seen as acceptable because it lowers the risk to both the learner and his or her potential victims (should there be mishaps during training). I would like to see virtual reality technology accepted and implemented more widely, and not just in those areas where replacing more critical training with virtual training is life-or-death. In learning about and reading up on Second Life and its uses in education, I was most impressed with the potential for improving social interaction for those in whom this skill is diminished, as in the case of people with autism. It's only a short leap from where we are now with online education to a fully immersive experience in a first-person environment in which students could interact more like they do in traditional classrooms, no matter the geographic distance between them.

McLellan, H. (2004). Virtual realities. In D. Jonassen, (Ed.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology* (2nd ed., pp. 461-497). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.