

Virtual Voices: Exploring Creative Practices to Support Life Skills Development among Young People Working in a Virtual World Community

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Abstract

The dialectical relationship between social justice, active participation and the development of aesthetic sensibilities is re-emerging as a theme among art and design educators as concerns mount for the future of art and design education in the curriculum – particularly in the UK, but also internationally. This article explores the potential of virtual worlds to support the development of young people's voices using creative practices – photography, film-making and fashion – as the principal means of engaging young people in developing their understanding of active citizenship. The use of creative practices to support a range of wider educational aims in virtual worlds has not yet been investigated and, we contend, is an area of serious research endeavour. We report on the research of an EPSRC/ESRC-funded project called 'Inter-Life' which examined how virtual worlds could be used to support the development and acquisition of life skills to enhance the management of important life transitions. The project investi-

gated the extent to which young people's engagement in creative practices within these environments assisted with these processes. Some implications for future research are outlined.

Keywords

creative practices, virtual worlds, social justice, student voice

Introduction

This article reports on the significance of creative practices in a project to support a range of wider educational aims, including those relating to social justice and the development of young people's own authentic voices. The dialectical relationship between social justice, active participation and the development of aesthetic sensibilities is re-emerging as a theme among art and design educators (Adams 2012; Darts 2004, 2006; Freedman 2000) as concerns mount for the future of art and design education in the curriculum – particularly in the UK (Adams & Hiatt 2012), and also internationally. Creative practices were used in the Inter-Life Project to support the development of young people's voices. The main focus of the research project was to explore how young people (aged 15–17) might use creative practices including photography, digital film making and fashion to support the development of life skills to enhance their management of important life transitions (Lally & Sclater 2012, 2013). The Inter-Life Project (2008–11) (see www.tel.ac.uk/) was funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). to investigate the role that virtual worlds might play in these processes. Supported by mentors who were also members of the research team, the young people developed a 'virtual research community' in Inter-Life, on one of its 'virtual islands'. What emerged was a vibrant group of young people – located in three distinct locations in the UK and the Caribbean – who used photography, fashion and film-making to address issues of social justice that were important to them in their own lives. In this article we illustrate our emergent findings with excerpts from one of the Caribbean workshop series, and an interview with one member of the UK group.

Recent work has explored the value of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the wider domain of professional design education (Wang 2011). Other studies have examined the role of text-based virtual

learning environments (VLEs) in online design education (Park 2011). Indeed, the use of ICTs is firmly embedded in art and design education more widely. However, the use of creative practices to support a range of wider educational aims in virtual worlds has not yet been investigated. Given the potential significance of virtual worlds in education, this is a state of affairs that could now attract significant research effort. For example, exciting developments in art and design education, such as Room 13, could be developed and extended using virtual worlds' technologies. Room 13 is an international initiative in which young people can work with their mentors in a network of student-organised art studios (Gibb 2012). The potential of virtual worlds to support interactivity and presence, leading to growing confidence in multiple forms of expression, requires careful research in order to realise this potential. After a short account of our method of working and theoretical background, we will examine three key themes that emerged during the research, and then go on to report briefly on the views and conversations of some of the young people with whom we worked in the Inter-Life Project.

Theoretical background

The Inter-Life Project also attempted to develop a theoretical framework that would be powerful enough to help us analyse and understand the activities of the young people with whom we worked. Activity Theory was identified as a promising candidate (based upon an approach developed by Halverson 2002) because it focuses on the constituent influences on activity, and places the participants and their goals centrally in 'systems of activity'. These systems include the tools used by young people, their motivations and ideas, the community context and the artefacts that they create. Within this general framework, we focused on creative practices as tools to support reflection on social justice issues, the use of virtual worlds as a community context and the development of young people's voices through creative practices.



Art and design education and social justice

There is an increasing body of work pointing to the power of art and design education as a vehicle to support the exploration of social justice issues through the development of pupil voice and exploration of visual culture. In her characterisation of Social Justice Education Garber (2004, 6), for example, argues that it can be thought of as 'guiding students to know themselves and their worlds'. She emphasises the communal and societal importance of the emergence of critical citizens who can develop through these forms of education so that they can employ the 'principles of justice, liberty and equality' in order to interact with others in their communities. Darts (2004) and Garber both argue that the study of visual culture, through art and design education, is an important vehicle through which social justice issues and the fostering of

democratic principles can be explored. Art educators' investigations of visual culture as a pedagogical strategy offers the potential to empower students to meaningfully grapple with the social, cultural and political tensions rooted in everyday visual experience. Garber regards empowerment as a process of 'reclaiming a voice' rather than as a means of acquiring personal power over others or objects (Garber 2004, 6). She argues that the act of helping students to develop their 'voice' actually requires educators to develop a deeper understanding of the array of contexts that young people find significant. This interest in understanding youth culture within art and design education can be realized, she argues, through the investigation of visual culture (Garber 2004, 6). Darts (2006) points out that visual culture provides an important locus where knowledge, beliefs and attitudes are moulded, where 'ideological struggles' take place – often without conscious consideration. It is for this reason, he argues, that an important component of art and design education is to enable young people to probe and critique these ideological struggles located in the commonplace. This can also be achieved by introducing the work of socially engaged artists to enable young people to move into new domains of awareness, critically to exam-

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 Figure 1: An Inter-Life Island meeting space, populated by artefacts created by the young people in the group
 Figure 2: Avatars of group members at the meeting space on Inter-Life Island

ine their relationship to consumer culture, and to develop insights into how their own individual identities are being shaped and developed in relation to it. It is argued that more socially engaged forms of art making offer the potential to shift young people from a position of 'passive cultural spectatorship' (Darts 2006, 324), to more proactive, generative and considered forms of engagement that facilitate critical reflection and the development of their individual voice (Garber 2004).

Virtual worlds and art and design education

In 1995 Paul Moore (Moore 1995) argued that 'virtual reality' was in a rudimentary state of development, yet might be destined to have a significant impact on the theory and practice of teaching and learning. Less than 20 years later 'virtual worlds' – providing a form of online virtual reality – have now emerged as a powerful medium for education (Lally & Sclater 2013). Yet, for many educators, the most familiar format in which they have encountered virtual worlds is computer games (Ma *et al.* 2011). Some of these games contain sophisticated 'immersive representations of reality' and have implications for education (Freitas & Liarakapis 2011), because they allow powerful social and interactive experiences for participants. However, game-based approaches to virtual worlds may require much more technical support, and are less flexible for educators, than more opened-ended virtual worlds. Open-ended virtual worlds (of the type featured in this article) are 'persistent, avatar-based social spaces that provide players or participants with the ability to engage in long-term, coordinated conjoined action' (Thomas & Brown 2009, 37). As a consequence of this flexibility the island became populated by many artefacts that were created by group members, which had meaning and significance for them in their work in this space (see Figure 1). These artefacts acquired significance for the young people as they were built and acquired over time, and formed the focus of the interactions between the members of the research community. They embodied the

accumulated history of the young people's interactions over the life of the project and provided the context, stimulus and memory for their ongoing interactions.

Using a visual representation of themselves (an avatar – see Figure 2) participants work and collaborate together using a virtual world client (such as Second Life) on a desktop computer that provides a sophisticated illusion of a three-dimensional environment (because the screen is actually two dimensional).

In art and design education evidence from the research literature is indicating that opened virtual worlds have considerable potential. As far back as 2008 Gaimster (Gaimster 2008) began to assess their potential for a wide range of learning and teaching activities in art and design. She concluded that the powerful sense of 'presence' and emotional engagement they engender, together with their adaptability to most disciplines in art and design, including architecture, cultural studies, fashion, film making and graphics (for example), deserved consideration by art and design educators. In a more recent study (Lu 2010) of the usefulness of virtual worlds for art education, Lu concluded that rich and extensive conversation and interaction was possible in her 'Art Café' in Second Life. Early innovators in the field of creative expression in virtual worlds had already provided the intellectual impetus for the development of a range of artistic practices that were previously 'impossible' in 'real life' (Moser & MacLeod 1996). This has led, for example, to Doyle's 'Kritical Works in SL' Project (Doyle 2008) in which she argues that the Second Life space itself is performative for both the artist and for the audience. There are drawbacks – the medium is not yet available for universal desktop use but it is available in a client form (that has to be downloaded). These limitations will be removed when the 3D internet becomes available, probably within five years (Alpcan *et al.* 2007; Rattner 2009).

Student/young people's voices and creative practices

In the Inter-Life Project one of the research aims was to create a 'virtual research community' in which the young people with whom we were working could develop some sense of 'ownership' of their learning (Lally & Sclater 2012, 2013). As a part of this process the research team wanted to encourage young people to express themselves in a variety of creative ways and develop their own 'voices' as part of this process. Therefore, the project has investigated how virtual worlds and creative practices have helped with this development.

The significance of 'student/young people's voice' in educational settings has now produced a substantial literature. In her pioneering work, Jean Rudduck (Fielding 2007) began to recognise the importance of students' voices in educational settings as far back as the mid 1980s. Rudduck's central insights, developed over a period of more than twenty years (see, for example, Rudduck 1984 and McIntyre *et al.* 2007), and embodied in the aims of Inter-Life, centrally encompass the need for teachers (in our case called 'mentors') to gain access to students' perspectives on teaching and learning as a 'precondition for any development of new ways of working' (Fielding 2007, 324). Furthermore, Rudduck (1984) viewed the establishment of 'genuine partnerships with young people' as essential 'if exploratory forms of learning are to become real, engaging and successful'. In Inter-Life the use of creative practices has been a key vehicle for building such partnerships with young people.

Rudduck's work is one significant strand in a movement that has begun to articulate the roles of young people/children as 'protagonists' in their own lives and learning. Kellett (2009, 31) has argued that this is the result of attitudinal shifts in society, whereas Sinclair (2004) has suggested that the growth of the consumer movement and the rights agenda, arising from the UK Government's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, are central drivers. However, as Kellett also points out, this 'move-

ment' is contested, especially when it requires an outcome that reflects the wishes and intentions of young people, and those involved are anticipating impact as a result of their engagement. Kellett argues that there is a need for more discussion about the possibilities of young people's participation having an impact on policy and practice. However, in Hulme's study of 'pupil' participation in Scottish schools (Hulme *et al.* 2011, 131) she reported that a significant group of teachers viewed pupil participation as external to the processes of classroom based pedagogy.

Methods and methodology

The Inter-Life Project worked with young people (aged 15–17) and their teachers at schools in the UK and the Caribbean. As part of the research we were investigating virtual worlds as a tool to develop 'intercultural communities', and hence we had sought involvement in the project's home country (the UK) and overseas (the Caribbean). Schools were approached through personal contacts of the research team (Caribbean) or an 'Open Day' (UK) that some participants attended in Glasgow. Initially we attempted to engage with both gifted and socially disadvantaged young people. However, because of the many practical issues with which we were faced as a team we did not pursue this approach. Therefore, all the young people and teachers with whom we eventually worked were self-selecting volunteers. The project sought and obtained the ethical approval of the University of Glasgow before starting the project. All participants gave their permission for data use before they joined the project. The work reported in this article involved young people and their teacher from the Caribbean, one pupil from the UK group, and researchers from the UK team. Comparisons between evidence obtained from the UK and Caribbean groups will be the subject of future work.

Activities were organised into several series of workshops. Each workshop generally lasted between one and two hours online in the virtual world. The workshop series contin-

ued for 10–20 weeks, and occurred after school, in the early evening. At the start of the project the researchers, in collaboration with the young people, generated a list of ‘issues’ and invited them to research one of the issues that was of personal interest. This process included a discussion around school rules and their purpose, bullying, and sharing of life situations, interests/hobbies and contexts. The discussion included thinking about and addressing social challenges in and out of school, for example, bullying and drug taking. The research team also engaged the young people directly in the project planning, teaching and evaluation process. During the project itself the young people made several films together, including one focused on bullying and others focused on recreational topics such as sailing, that encapsulated the shared experiences of group outings. Through these activities we concentrated on the development of ‘meaning making’ using textual interactions, film-making, photography and writing as ways to help the young people negotiate the challenges of their own lives – both in an out of school. The activities with which young people engaged were designed to help them make sense of their experiences, to facilitate critical enquiry and to engage in problem solving. In these approaches the project was informed by the work of Paulo Freire (Freire & Freire 2004) and Augusto Boal (2000, 2006). Particularly, Freire’s work informed our approach to encourage the young people to name and describe the world in their own words, using creative practices, and our engagement with them in a dialogical critique of the challenges and opportunities they encountered. From the work of Boal we have drawn many influences, including the power of art forms (in his case theatre) to reach into reality and assist in its transformation. For us the creative practices we have described served this purpose.

Previous work by one of the authors (De Laat & Lally 2003, 2004) had allied this approach with multi-method techniques, including content analysis and critical event

recall, and applied these together in the analysis of text-based communication between online collaborators. Elsewhere we report in detail how this approach reveals the ways in which the young people on Inter-Life Island construct new skills, develop new insights and apply these to the real world (Lally & Sclater 2012, 2013). In the present article we use quotations from virtual world workshops and an interview, in which these young people participated, to illustrate their engagement with social justice issues, creativity, skills acquisition and the development of their own voices through the use of creative practices. All the participants are referred to by their avatar names.

Virtual voices from Inter-Life

In this section we have included a very brief selection from some voices of young people who worked with us in the Inter-Life Island virtual world. The project created a large dataset of images, videos, text-based interactions and interviews with participants, over a period of two years. The extracts presented here illustrate the young people’s engagement with social justice issues, creative practices, skills development and the emergence of their own voices through the use of creative practices. In some places these themes are inextricably linked as confidence develops and the young people claim the island space as their own.

The first extract is taken from an interview with one of the UK-based young people who participated in a 10-week workshop series that used creative practices to support the investigation of social justice issues and the development of voice. In it Cyberstar is talking about what it means to her to have control over the appearance of her avatar in Inter-Life. She had not previously used computers, or virtual worlds.

Interviewer: *Tell me about your avatar?*

Cyberstar: *I am the really pink one with green hair ... I think everyone does their own avatar to suit their personality ... pink for me is a sort of funky personality, don't care what people think*



of you if you go out with blinking boots up to here and a top down to there ... you don't really care.

Interviewer: *This might seem like a stupid question to you ... I wouldn't go outside dressed as a fox [interviewer has an avatar that is a fox] – I would be scared of doing that ... people would think I was seriously weird. People might not serve you in shops ... my kids would think something strange had happened. So I wouldn't do that outside but I would be quite happy to be a fox on the Inter-life Island. What do you think of the possibility that you can have an avatar that you can change...?*

Cyberstar: *Well this is me and I want to [change it]. It's quite fun. In real life you can't change it. Every avatar is individual and they want that avatar to look like them, they want it to be*

unique. In real life people tell you what you should and shouldn't wear... like if I go out and I buy a pair of boots and they say that doesn't suit you and you're like ' how would you know' are you me? You get pretty annoyed that people tell you what you think you should wear and what they think you hair colour should be and [I think] Listen if I want to wear this I will wear it. You're the boss of your own person and you're the boss of your own style. It feels like there were no rules ... people slag you off [insult you] more in the real world than they do in Inter-life because you are a person you want to be ... I tried to be myself.

(UK Group Interview with Cyberstar, 11 November 2010)

The ability to customize avatars and develop buildings and a wide range of other artefacts was an important feature of Inter-Life Island for participants. This is a creative practice that is not easily available in the 'real' world. It meant that young people could incorporate a wide range of expression into the way they interacted with each other and the virtual world space of Inter-Life Island. For Cyberstar these experiences represented an opportunity to express herself and gain some control over her own life-world. The issue of control over one's

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Figure 3: Cyberstar's pink and green avatar conducts a guided tour of Inter-Life Island on the back of a flying turtle

Figure 4: A Caribbean Group Meeting at the meeting space on the beach: exploring how to work together using the interactive boards

life emerged on many occasions in the workshops. Darts (2006) has argued that creative expression can support the need to move towards more proactive forms of expression and engagement. Here Cyberstar is involved in both. In Figure 3 we can see Cyberstar's pink and green avatar conducting a guided tour of Inter-Life Island on the back of a flying turtle. The following four extracts are taken from the first phase of the Caribbean workshop series. They are organised thematically.

Social justice issues

Both of the groups of young people who worked on Inter-Life Island (Caribbean- and UK-based) were concerned about issues of equity and justice in the ways in which they worked and related to one another on the island. Considerable energy and discussion was devoted to exploring how to work together in ways that would help to maintain 'fairness' on the island. It was important to share these ideas in an accessible way. To facilitate this the research team developed 'interactive boards' on the island, with one board allocated to each team member. The boards were used for a variety of purposes such as the sharing of personal interests and narratives through text and photography, and for the development of community rules and ways of operating in Inter-Life. In the following extract mentors from the research team (denoted by *) review progress on the co-development of shared rules for working together on Inter-Life Island. Much of the thinking that had taken place about this issue had been summarised on a set of interactive boards (see Figure 4). Ownership and storage of data from the boards was one of the practical issues that the young people in the group, and research team, were struggling to solve.

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Butler and Ralph – while we're waiting I wanted to go over some of the code of conduct 'cause we're always updating it with people's views*
Ralph Navarita: *Alright*
Butler Lyric: *Ok*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Butler, have you got any thought about things you'd like to add?*
Butler Lyric: *No*
Ralph Navarita: *I could do that*
*Cobalt Dertzer: *Thanks Ralph*
*Cobalt Dertzer: *Okay Butler*
*Cobalt Dertzer: *So far we've got ideas about respecting each other*
*Cobalt Dertzer: *Giving each other space*
*Cobalt Dertzer: *No swearing*
(Caribbean Group Discussion in Inter-Life Island 28 June 2011)

In this extract members of the research team led the discussion. Many of the early discussions required considerable support and sensitivity so that the voices of the young people could be heard in the discussion. As Garber has argued, this was about guiding students to know themselves and their world (Garber 2004 p.6). The interactive boards supported the young people by providing a 'public' record of earlier discussions among themselves, and private thinking. Once again, this discussion was interspersed with photography depicting the lives, locales and interests of group members. In this way their own interests and personalities were strongly visible to the whole group, which helped to build a confident voice, and a willingness to express feelings, thoughts and concerns. As we have argued, Garber regards this empowerment as a process of 'reclaiming a voice' (Garber 2004, 6). Helping students to develop their 'voice' requires a deeper understanding of the contexts that young people find significant. This interest in understanding youth culture within art and design education can be realised through the investigation of visual culture (Garber 2004, 6).

Finding a voice and creative expression on Inter-Life Island

We would like to argue that the process of 'finding a voice' was catalysed, for the young people in this group, by their involvement in a range of creative practices; some of these practices were enacted on the island. Others

were discussed, and possibilities for further expression were investigated, planned and praised. The following two extracts from the Caribbean group illustrate how this process of catalysis arose from linkages in the conversations. In the first extract a conversation between members of the research team (*) and young people about Russian artists leads to praise of the film work being undertaken by another young person as part of the island-filming project.

Shelly Coy: *Lol [laugh out loud] Russians are good artists*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Yes*

Shelly Coy: *Extremely good*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *And writers*

Shelly Coy: *Yep*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *And poets*

Shelly Coy: *Yep!*

Shelly Coy: *For sure*

Shelly Coy: *I write poems a little as well*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *The great Tolstoy*

Shelly Coy: *But I haven't in a while*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Turgenev*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Ahkmatova*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Guys do you know if Morris is coming tonight?*

Ralph Navarita: *I don't think so*

Marshall Vectoscope: *No he's not*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Cool*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *OK*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *If you see him can you tell him his film is really good*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Yes, the film was brill*

(Caribbean Group Discussion in Inter-Life Island 31 May 2011)

In the second extract researchers from the team (*) facilitated a discussion in which they encouraged one group member to discuss his 'virtual' guitar and his real-life interest in music. This 'catalyses' another young person to talk about her writing, drawing and photography. A third young person became involved in talking about his interests in American soccer.

*Cobalt Dertzer: *When did you get your guitar?*

Ralph Navarita: *Found it in clothing section of the library folder [on Inter-Life Island – it is a virtual guitar]*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Do you play the guitar in real life?*

Ralph Navarita: *Yep*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *It would be good to have little of your music/playing recorded and put it here [on the island]*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *yeah you could upload a song or just some audio to your board*

Phillip Kroll: *Hi*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *We were talking about Ralph's guitar playing*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Do any of the rest of you play any instruments?*

Shelly Coy: *Not really ... I draw*

Marshall Vectoscope: *I played guitar but I don't practice often anymore*

Shelly Coy: *And write and stuff*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Writing can be tough. What do you write?*

Shelly Coy: *Not really, it's easy for me*

Shelly Coy: *All sorts of different stories*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Have you had any published yet?*

Shelly Coy: *Yea most of my stories start as dreams or what I imagine in my head*

Shelly Coy: *No*

Shelly Coy: *Lol [laugh out loud]. I don't let others read my stuff kinda embarrassed but those who have read say I should*

Shelly Coy: *But I don't know*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *If you are shy about your drawing you could take a photo of some of them and post them online*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *It'd be great to have a look*

Phillip Kroll: *She has a book of her drawings*

Shelly Coy: *I have 2 books*

Shelly Coy: *And pages everywhere*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *You'll be an internationally famous artist :)*

Shelly Coy: *Lol. My 3rd liking is photography so YAY*

Shelly Coy: *Lol thanks :)*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Phillip what kinds of football do you like? Is it soccer or American football?*

Phillip Kroll: *Soccer*

Shelly Coy: *That's great*
(Caribbean Group Discussion in Inter-Life
Island 31 May 2011, 2)

The interplay of real life and virtual world artefacts, discussions and practices became a significant aspect of the work of the Caribbean group as it evolved during the workshop series. As young people found their virtual voices on Inter-Life Island they shared more of their existing interests and achievements through engagement in photography and film-making. This sharing process stimulated discussions about new possibilities, both on the island and in the real world. It enabled the researchers to develop 'genuine partnerships with the young people' with whom we were working (Rudduck & Hopkins 1984; Kellett 2009).

Skills development – modelling consultation

A further aspect of the Inter-Life Project was to support the development of practical skills that young people could use in managing their own personal lives in the real world. As the 'community' gained in confidence the young people began to engage more confidently in dialogue with the research team, expressing opinions and experiencing the process of consultation that they would use later in their creative practice work. In this example from an early point in the life of the group, research team members (*) model the process of consultation among group members about how the project is progressing:

*Grover Warden: *What is the plan for tonight?*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *We can list the things on our minds?*

*Indire Emerald: *Sounds good*

*Grover Warden: *Recruitment, building, film making, etc.?*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Board updates?*

*Cobalt Dertzer: *Maybe some feedback from Marshall and Indire?*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Yes.*

*Jianhua Galaxy: *Indire, what are your items?*

*Indire Emerald: *I would actually like to get feedback from Marshall about how he feels*

about the program so far and the progress
Marshall Vectoscope: *I think we could do building because I have not done much so far*
(Caribbean Group Discussion in Inter-Life
Island 19 April 2011)

This extract illustrates the modest contributions of young people to the discussion at the early stage of the community. In the three earlier extracts it can be seen how this level of interaction increased considerably over a period of approximately 8 weeks. It gives an insight into how the team worked alongside the young people to support a wide range of skills that could be used to engage in group work to support creative practices. It is also another example of the wider range of educational aims that can be met through engagement in creative practices. Elsewhere we have reported in more detail the wide range of life-skills that have emerged as communities of young people have worked together in Inter-Life (Lally & Sclater 2013). These have included communicating clearly with adults in a variety of contexts. Young people have developed skills of reflection and the formulation of clear plans, explanations and presentations. The scheduling of work has also been developed. Most importantly, they had all been required to think about other members of the team, and the individual roles that would be required in creative processes. Interviewees reported acquiring interpersonal and team skills, increasing confidence, as well as a better understanding of the realities and challenges in their projects.

Virtual worlds and art and design education: possible futures

In this article we have reported on a particular aspect of the Inter-life Project – the way in which it has utilised creative practices from the visual arts in an attempt to provide young people with the means to consciously reflect upon their lives, influenced by the work of Freire and Boal. In doing this, the research team encouraged the young people to engage in activities that might help to bring about posi-

tive transformation of themselves and their communities. Such possibilities, we have argued, grew out of a process of dialogue and collective exchange between participants, researchers and the wider community – teachers, parents, family and friends. The central tenet of this article is that while the initial focus of activity in the virtual world has been on creative practices controlled and animated by the young people, the engagement that occurred quickly moved into issues of wider educational and personal significance. These issues focused on social justice and the development of young people's voices. Our endeavours to foster this approach to enquiry is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire and his ideas around praxis (practical action informed, in this study, by reflection), where, in this case, young people learn to question the status quo, and critically reflect and act in order to bring about some form of personal transformation. For example, Cyberstar showed a new ability to express her views about her appearance, and who controls it. She explained how the Inter-Life world allowed her to be herself, and gave her the space, and the tools (the ability to modify her avatar's fashion profile) to act and reflect upon these issues (UK Group Interview with Cyberstar, 11 November 2010).

The exploration of creative practices was one of the main communication mechanisms in Inter-Life for supporting and fostering meaningful social interaction among the young people. The activities in Inter-life Island provided a means for young people to understand themselves in relation to others. Creative practices were used for the exploration of concepts, issues and ideas as distinct from a focus on technique or primarily aesthetic considerations. We focused on the visual culture of everyday life as a starting point. This helped the young people to make direct connections between themselves, the objects of their intrigue and wider social, political and cultural issues that they encountered both in the Caribbean and the UK.

The examples from the 'virtual voices' of young people that we have used to illustrate

the activities in Inter-Life point towards the potential significance of virtual worlds to offer many ways in which participants can feel some ownership and confidence in a learning space. The interactive boards (Figure 4) became a shared visual space that was completely under the control of the young people in the group. It was in this space that concerns about social justice issues emerged as everyday life activities were represented in photography. The avatars allowed very flexible control, over fashion and appearance. Cyberstar's reflective account asked important questions about who controls her appearance in the real world, and 'ownership' of one's body. Giving young people control over how the environment was constructed, how it was used (see the artefacts in Figures 1 and 3, for example) and what was displayed and created, seemed to act as a catalyst for engagement in social and creative issues.

Future research

Virtual worlds technologies are currently limited in their availability for widespread educational use. However, the technologies continue to develop and will become ubiquitous as learning spaces in the medium term, raising many challenges and significant opportunities for educators. The power of creative practices to support a wide range of significant educational aims in these learning spaces points to a significant opportunity for art and design educators to engage in research and innovatory practices that may help to secure the future of art and design as a discipline. For example, our work in the careers and guidance field (Lally & Sclater 2013) has demonstrated that creative practices from art and design can help young people to form virtual communities. These communities can then become a basis for a wide range of relevant skills development that has wide application. Further research opportunities exist, to understand more about how creative practices can support community development. Another important dimension is the exploration of social justice issues. This is important in many

aspects of education and youth work. Interdisciplinary research work by Art and Design educators and other curriculum specialists is needed to develop this. The work of Jean Rudduck and others has highlighted the importance of helping young people to find ways of expressing themselves. This is central to the advancement of education itself as a practice. Our work (see, for example, Sclater & Lally 2013) has indicated the central importance, in this advancement, of art and design practices. However, here too, more research is required. We suggest that art and design educators should increase their interdisciplinary engagement with these wider educational aims and the related research agenda. In this endeavour, virtual worlds, combined with art and design practices, may provide a basis for art and design educators to play a more central role in both formal and informal education.

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