

I stand before you as Rupert Uriza, all 7 foot 2 inches of him, but in real life my name is Helen Farley. I'm a lecturer in studies in religion at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. Because I am in Brisbane, it's 2:45 on a cold winter's morning so I ask you all to forgive my bleariness ☺.

Today, the title of my presentation is 'Studies in Religion in Second Life: Creating Immersion and Engagement'. I'm not going to talk so much about 'The Future of Religions' but the future of Studies in Religion in this fascinating and complex environment, more correctly termed a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE).

But first, some about where I come from ... and what we do in the Antipodes. Studies in Religion is a small discipline at the University of Queensland. We cohabitate in a School with history, philosophy, classics and ancient history, nestled in the Faculty of Arts (check us out at www.uq.edu.au/hprc). We have about 1000 students through our doors each year, over three semesters. We offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses but also offer research higher degrees in studies in religion but also in Islamic studies.

In recent years we've moved away from courses about the major world religions (and even ones about more marginalized religions) and our offerings tend to be more thematic. For example I teach about the history of divination and I teach about that in a variety of religions and religious contexts. Similarly, I teach about secret societies and esotericism, again in a wide variety of contexts. We do have the generic 'Introduction to World Religions' course which every good science student feels they need to really round out their degree.

We do offer a major in religion as part of the BA or Bachelor of Arts degree, and even a double major, but most of our students are from other faculties looking to do an elective (and an easy elective I suspect!)

As you can imagine, religionists can be a fairly conservative lot (though the very existence of this conference demonstrates that this isn't always the case!) But guess what? Our students aren't. Our students are regularly checking their Facebook and MySpace accounts (in one of my classes of 50, only 2 didn't have a Facebook account!) They're blogging, editing Wikipedia (for generations of other university students to inappropriately reference) and spinning the latest tunes on their iPod Touch (how I want one of those!) Then we ask those students to come to class, forget the excitement of their multimedia lives, watch a lecturer talk to a PowerPoint presentation and magically develop higher order thinking skills, as well as social and ethical responsibility, empathy and so on. Well, it worked for us didn't it?

We're still here to tell the tale ... but we forget that was 20 years ago (at least) and we were already top of the heap. Do we know what happened to those students who weren't top of the class? It's time we thought about how we teach studies in religion. And it's time we thought about who we are teaching. Could Second Life be the answer?

Second Life provides an unparalleled opportunity for people to interact with each other and their environment in unfamiliar and innovative ways. Though educators have been quick to spot the potential, many have merely created replicas of conventional learning spaces that exist on real-life campuses. Indeed, this approach reduces the cognitive dissonance commonly experienced by both educators and students in unfamiliar environments, but it also fails to fully leverage the unique qualities of this infinitely modifiable setting to provide truly immersive learning experiences. I was intrigued by the immersive learning possibilities afforded us by Second Life. And in fact, I think studies in religion can lay special claim to this environment. The motional avatars that populate Second Life take their name from a Sanskrit word, which in Hindu mythology means 'the descent of a deity to earth in a *visible form*' ;-). The choice of avatars can reflect a player's gender, ethnicity, and personality – or allow a student to assume a completely different identity, in itself a unique learning experience.

So what can this environment offer us? First and foremost it provides immersion: that feeling of really being there. Of not being aware that you're watching a computer screen. Instead you are in that scene: walking, talking, and taking communion.

Though we originally talked about immersion in relation to the acquisition of language skills, it has been found to be equally useful in other disciplines. Through work done by Ross Mckerlich and Terry Anderson we know that immersive environments (we're talking MUVes here) offer enhanced presence and that the 'physical' presence of students and teacher as avatars added to the immersive environment educational experience. As a result of this immersion, engagement is enhanced, flow is supported, collaboration becomes both possible and supported and new identity development and exploration affords positive effects.

And the downsides? Well, we're all familiar with the technological glitches that can make a thorough nuisance of themselves when one would rather be cavorting around Second Life. For some, the inconvenience and frustration is just too much. But I hope (and pray) that those issues will become less frequent for everyone, (not just newbies).

Blah, blah, blah ... I've given you good, sound reasons for taking students to Second Life, but I suspect you're most interested in what we're going to do. And what we have already been doing. Well ...

I can stand in front of a class and tell them about the Hajj. They'll get some idea about it. I can show the students photos and maybe some news footage (what isn't available on YouTube?) They'll find out more. We might be able to have someone come and talk about their own experiences. Wow, that would be great but how does it compare to being there? Well, that's rather an extreme example, Mecca is a long, long way from Brisbane.

At the moment we send our students out to various religious spaces. Students are told to be respectful, stay out of the way and document all they see. But there's transport and insurance and timing. And I've already told you Mecca is a long way from Brisbane. Well, Hindu temples aren't plentiful either in this relatively conservative, mostly white community. So how under these circumstances am I going to counter the images of Apu of the Simpsons and show my students the wondrous complexity that is Hinduism? Or even Orthodox Christianity among a Protestant majority? Or how is a woman ever going to see what happens within a Freemasonic temple (assuming that she wants to of course)?

In Second Life this all becomes possible. There are already so many beautiful religious spaces here. The peace and tranquility of the Buddhist Shrine of Varosha or the gothic awe of the cathedral on Epiphany Island. Head down there on any Sunday and hear Arkin Ariantho deliver a sermon to a church full of avatars, many whose real life counterparts can't comfortably or safely leave their homes. Here they are engaging with their religious community. Who am I to say that this isn't a genuine expression of devotion? So, I can send my students to those religious places already extant in Second Life. Can't I? Yes, and I do. So they can go and listen and learn, ever documenting their experiences (maybe through a BlogHUD). I'm still uneasy about this and the problem I have with this is that students are going along and observing genuine religious worship and watching participants like zoo animals. Most don't mind for sure but I'm still not easy with it. I'm certainly not at ease with them participating more fully in religious rituals as outsiders, even in Second Life.

The solution that we've come up with is to create a UQ Studies in Religion island, which we've affectionately called 'Religion Bazaar'. My colleague (and Discipline Convenor) Dr Rick Strelan and I successfully applied for a pot of money set aside for strategic teaching and learning initiatives. We've tried to represent as many traditions as we can squeeze onto one small space. We're creating a church, a synagogue, a mosque but also a Hindu temple, a Buddhist temple, a Freemasons Lodge (to satisfy my urge to know what goes on!) and some natural spaces too. One of our staff members is involved in researching spirituality and the environment. For her we have a rocky outcrop overlooking a sea full of

brightly coloured fish. One of my postgraduates is investigating the ritual in ritual magic so we have some spaces to accommodate that intriguing and important research. Did I mention our very distinguished and ancient-looking Greek temple?

So beyond attending an existing service, students will be able to adopt an identity (an avatar we've already created) and enter into one of our religious spaces to participate in a ritual or a re-creation. Students can swap roles; walk a mile in someone else's moccasins (or however that saying goes!) They must observe the traditions of that religion: shoes off, wash before entering, appropriate clothing only – male and female. Respectful, always respectful. And unlike real life spaces, there will be plenty of notecards to give students the information they need. These are not genuine religious services – that's not the point - but through them students can learn what they are like.

Kim Anubis (Kimberley Rufer-Bach) is the genius behind the behind the design. And while our island is still being born in the massive womb of NMC, she and her team (aptly called 'Magicians') are building in the stratosphere above Abracadabra. I've brought along just a few photos to show you. I know how tedious proud parents can be. We hope to have the island up and running by semester II, which is July for us. The creation of the buildings is just the first stage. Then comes the endless scripting, poses, clothes. Thank goodness you can pay someone to do that!

I haven't mentioned that in the centre of our island will be the recreation of the University of Queensland's Great Court; it's sandstone and iconic. But there will also be some other spaces such as an amphitheatre for lectures and concerts, and some general gathering spaces. We're planning on keeping the spaces closed while UQ students are doing something specific for a class but it will be open at all other times. I hope you come and visit us.

Well, I have plenty more to say. I seem to have found my stride; but for now I'll quit typing (very difficult with just two fingers!) If you want to be kept in touch with what we're up to, join the UQ Studies in Religion group. It's free!

It's been an absolute pleasure being here.

Questions?