



Arts and Education in the Virtual World: In Conversation with Bernhard Drax (Germany), Scott Grant (Australia), Chris Mooney-Singh (Singapore) and Jay Jay Jegathesan (Australia)

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Two virtual world presentations were shared on Day 2 of the Lit Up Asia Festival 2018 with demonstrations streamed live from *Second Life* and *Sansar*, two user-created virtual worlds owned by Linden Labs (USA). Bernhard Drax is an independent virtual filmmaker from Munich, Germany. Australia-based Dr Scott Grant from Monash University is the designer of Chinese Island, a 3D virtual Chinese township used for learning Chinese language and culture as part of curricular work undertaken by undergraduate students enrolled in the Chinese Studies program. Scott, along with Dr Chris Mooney-Singh, are also the designers and builders of Caravanserai, a simulated 3D desert waystation on the Silk Road and The Merlion Portal, which closely references in 3D form “Ulysses by the Merlion,” Singapore’s most iconic poem by Edwin Thumboo. This region has recreated Singapore’s national symbol, the merlion (fish-lion) as a multimedia arts gallery showcasing Singapore history, culture and the arts. The interview was conducted by Savinder Kaur of The Writers Centre Singapore, who is also the Executive Director of Lit Up Asia.

Savinder Kaur: Bernhard, as a documentary filmmaker what was your perception of Lit Up Asia?

Bernhard Drax: This was a huge festival, two and a half days with delegations from the South Asia Pacific region, from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, a traditional dance, a Chinese opera. Now I know you're going to ask: what does that have to do with virtual worlds? Well, it has a lot to do with virtual worlds because I think, as Dr Chris Mooney-Singh pointed out: dress up pantomime - quote unquote, gender swapping in Chinese opera or Balinese mime in some narratives is like adopting an avatar.

SK: Why combine virtual world content with an arts festival?

BD: There were a lot of people who were never exposed to user-created virtual worlds like Second Life or Sansar at this event in Singapore and the response was amazing. We all had a sort of epiphany that we need to bring culture into virtual worlds much more forcefully, and we need to make sure that these spaces, these platforms are used for cultural preservation and dialogue. Virtual worlds can be like museums that you can passively look at as well as being something that continues to grow.

SK: What was your perception of the Merlion Portal?

BD: As far as I could see this simulated virtual space references the main cultural icon of Singapore - the lion-fish creature known as the Merlion. This was my first time to Singapore which is an amazing country. It's a city state comprising a tiny island between Malaysia and the islands of Indonesia that was under British rule for over a century and gained independence in 1965. Dr Chris Mooney-Singh and Dr Scott Grant (AKA Kaylee West) created the Merlion Portal in Second Life and they also designed LIt Up Asia, a performance space in Sansar, the new VR-enabled domain which we also used for this particular event. Here Sansar residents in avatar forms from around the world enjoyed a live performance of spoken word streamed on screen, made popular through slam poetry which Chris brought to Singapore in 2003.

Chris Mooney-Singh: Yes, I went to the US in 2003 and stayed with Marc Smith, the "slampapi" of Chicago. He introduced me to all the key players in North America at a conference and a youth wing of this competitive form. We then invited him to Singapore and for more than fifteen years now have nurtured spoken word activities in a major way in Singapore that have all come from the mother ship of the poetry slam.

SK: Introducing something new can be an uphill battle. But what's your assessment after doing this?

CMS: In 2003, we were confronted by a more academic culture and there was not much emphasis on audience-centred presentation. A poetry reading was more a peer-to-peer activity. We've changed that to a large degree. And when I talk about poetry slam, I'm not really pushing a style. I'm talking about reaching out to audiences who may not have much contact with poetry other than what they read at school. I feel that performance is an antidote to something in the culture that has taken a wrong direction and limits the scope of poetry as a public art form. Well, Poetry Slam has played its part drawing wider audiences to poetry in general and Lit Up, now in its eighth year, has staged many national Slam events as well as launched the spoken word poets' careers of such as Marc Nair, Pooja Nansi, Bani Haykal, Stephanie Chan, Deborah Emmanuel, Shivaram Gopinath, Jennifer Anne Champion, Victoria Lim, Charlene Shepardson, Benjamin Chow, Goh, Amber Lin and more, three of whom (Haykal, Nair and Nansi) have won the Young Artist of the Year, a national award in Singapore. Several have been published with Arts Council funding and have been regular headliners at national events

BD: By misdirection you also mean that it's too insular and limited to arty circles, an ivory tower within an ivory tower?

CMS: Yes, a poetry slam, as Marc Smith showed me is just poetic theatre. After sixteen years, this has now gone regional which was the original vision. During Lit Up Asia 2018 we held the first Asia-Pacific Slam event with poets from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore because we are committed to promoting oral traditions of the Asia-Pacific region, past and present. The historic event took place at Blu Jaz Cafe, our most loyal venue sponsor for the festival and for the past decade, situated nearly Haji Lane in Kampong Glam. This is the Malay and Islamic heritage area of Singapore.

SK: Where do virtual worlds figure in all this, Bernhard?

BD: Well, this name Haji Lane reminds me the virtual Haj to Mecca created by Islamonline.net in Second Life in 2007 or thereabouts. I went there and you were given the haj garb and were able to get a sense of that pilgrimage experience even if you weren't a Muslim. That's kind of like the repository of culture that I was talking about earlier - being able to simulate a profound cultural experience.

CMS: Yes, I also went there and did the same.

BH: And if we to transpose that Second Life experience of a first-generation virtual world to Sansar with its VR goggles and real-time motion tracking controllers, then the virtual Haj can be so much more immersive. Getting back to your question, Savinder, it's clear that the Lit Up Festival doesn't have a problem mixing cultural experiences or art and literature with virtual worlds, which some may regard as the end of all culture. In fact, some people have looked me straight in the face and said if we engage with cartoon people in the computer this is incompatible with high art.

SK: Some would say that virtual worlds or gaming is just a distraction or escape.

CMS: We don't have a distance learning program at the LASSALE College where I also teach. I personally was attracted to virtual worlds like Second life to write a piece of fiction, published some years back in the South-East Asian Anthology of Short Stories. I also discovered that Second Life has a very vibrant poetry and storytelling scene, along with theatre, live music and even animation dancing to name a small portion of the activities. Much later, I established a weekly workshop. I called it the FTB meet-up which means Finish-the-Book group. Each of the four members, all published authors have completed a novel, many short stories and some long poems. We read up one member's work in advance and then sit around a virtual campfire and give feedback each week.. I find this invaluable with like-minded peers online and in real time - one from Brighton, one from London, one from Cleveland, and I'm between Australia and Singapore and it's going on for more than five years.

BH: That's amazing.

CMS: It's an erudite group. We don't really want to make it any bigger because we don't want to change the dynamic.

BH: Absolutely. Yeah. We also have the Sansar Harvest Street Book Club which is open to all. People wander in and get exposed to really exciting things that may open their minds. I might be naive, but I think virtual activities like this can bring the joy of reading back to some people who have been put off by that teacher in middle school or something.

SK: Talking of education, Jay Jay, you have been the coordinator of activities run by various departments at the University of Western Australia through Second Life. Can you share how teaching in virtual spaces augments classroom learning, especially in the field of mathematics, science and medicine? For example, we hear of great sports figures like Michael Jordan mentally rehearsing a lay-up and shooting goals. Is this something like virtual edu-roleplay, say in medical surgery or health care?

JJ: Well quite a number of medical and human biology schools in universities across the world use virtual architecture and things like Second Life incorporated into their teaching on a needs basis. At UWA, Professor Stuart Bunt used it to introduce his students to expensive equipment which they would practice on virtually and gain competence before using the actual piece of equipment which could cost anywhere from a quarter of a million dollars upwards. Our collaborators in the University of Kentucky replicated a number of parts in the human body so that avatars of students could literally walk into some parts of the body like the heart and lungs and witness how some of these worked up close. Virtual technologies are never meant to replace conventional modes of teaching wholesale, but to be used in targeted circumstances where they add value.

SK: What has the research shown about virtual learning?

JJ: One of the most interesting things to come out of research into virtual worlds are the global communities that have materialised around the world because of it. The communities can be described as *communities of practice*, and I have noticed them mushrooming around the activities we involved ourselves in, be they communities of artists, filmmakers or researchers. What was particularly pleasing was being able to build such communities for individuals who had been physically isolated, and a number of them were in the Balearic Islands in Spain or the Welsh Mountains where they knew no others involved in their craft.

SK: What about the fine arts? I understand that you have facilitated and maintain a unique international 3D art gallery in Second Life through annual competitions.

JJ: UWA presence in Second Life rests on 4 cornerstones. Research, teaching, arts and architecture. While things like Research, Teaching and Architecture happened during specific periods and specific days during semester, etc, it was the arts and film that made the presence alive on a daily basis as there would be individuals from all over the world visiting the galleries every day and artists submitting artworks across the year. With filmmakers

they would use the grounds of the UWA presence as a space to film their creations often featuring iconic spaces on the UWA campus, including Winthrop Clock Tower and the Sunken Gardens.

SK: Recently movies like *Roleplayer One* and *Kiss Me First* have brought popular focus to virtual worlds and depict them in feature films. Can you also talk about short filmmaking in virtual spaces? How does it differ from shooting in the ‘real world? Are there advantages and limitations? What quality of work has been produced?

JJ: Some wonderful films have been created through virtual world technologies. Spaces like Second Life are basically 3D graphics engines, and one shoots a film there by real time motion capture processes. One of the biggest advantages of using virtual worlds would be the cost of creating complex sets depicting other worlds, elven forests or different parts of the world some thousands or even millions of years ago. Limitations would be that some of the natural movement of the avatars and characters could be less natural than traditional animation unless one was working with a very skilled scripter who could program the movements the director wants, and this would of course increase the cost of making such a film. A film called *Metaphor*, which I produced in collaboration with French director, Basile Vignes was the first film created in Second Life that won the overall animation award in competition with animated films created with traditional technologies. This was at a film festival in the USA.

SK: Dr Scott Grant, you teach Chinese language at Monash University in Australia. What is your take on virtual worlds as a means of bringing culture, language arts and literature together through virtual worlds? I understand you have developed a new approach to language learning that involves students communicating with virtual characters in Chinese in a virtual Chinese city as part of task-based learning lessons. I hear one of the tasks involve students having to ask how to make a virtual version of traditional Chinese dish, where to buy the ingredients, how to get to the market to buy the ingredients and so on.

Scott Grant: Yes, it's like a real conversation. This is totally natural language processing. The students have to really stop and think, okay, how do I ask this question? You might ask a question, you might not get back the information that you actually need and you've got to think about, well, okay, so I didn't get what I need. How else can I ask this question? In a classroom I can say to you, “Okay, now please take this route to get to the market. Go right, walk three streets down and you're there.” Then you say: “Okay, fine, thanks.” That's the end of it. In our virtual space, however, they have to ask the right question to get those directions. They have to understand

what is said to them and act on it. They have to go out, they have to turn right, they have to walk down the street or they won't find the market.

SK: How do you assess the students?

SG: My students get feedback on how they are performing throughout the tasks from the virtual characters and environment. One of the reasons I don't formal assessment of the tasks because I want them to collaborate and fully engage with the rich learning environment. I don't want them to just focus on marks. I have a colleague with a very Chinese approach to education. Everything has to be assessed, so when her students do my Chinese Island virtual world lessons, they have to complete the tasks on their own and her students are very assessment focused. One of the problems that we have is that we inherit a certain mindset from high school where students spend twelve years being drilled in how to pass the end of high school exams and there is a particular way of learning. By the time we get them at university, it's too late. They're spoiled already and it's a real struggle to get them to see learning differently. I feel we must try and get them to break out of that. Some get it and can adapt to virtual learning. Others struggle. Our research shows that a third get what virtual learning is. Then we have the third that hate it. In our surveys done every semester, we always get those few that when asked on how to improve the unit say: "Drop Second Life."

SK: Why?

SG: Because this is part of the educational mindset of rote learning they were bred on that we were talking about before. They don't see it as legitimate learning. They think legitimate learning is memorising. It's doing quizzes. That's legitimate, right? Because that's what they've been trained for in the past, whereas virtual education is not as clear cut. It's much more amorphous. Everyone gets something different out of it. Some of the students can't get their heads around it. Next, there is that middle third who are just okay with virtual learning. They're not particularly one way or the other.

SK: That sounds challenging.

SG: The other big problem that we have and I really, I'm sorry, Marc Prensky you're probably a lovely guy, but you've really caused problems for us with your assumptions about "digital natives" and "digital immigrants." We

had a funny situation among my students doing another unit that will illustrate what I mean. We are doing a digital-exam project with an assessment system that runs off a USB stick. Students have to turn off their laptop, plug it in, turn on the computer and then do the exam. When it came to asking students to “Please turn off your laptops”, some said, “Um, I'm not quite sure how to turn off my laptop,” because they'd never turned it off since the day they bought it. In other words, there is this assumption that today's digital age, youngsters are born into this whole thing. Well, it's not true. A lot of them can barely use programmes like Word and Excel. And when you put them in this kind of environment cognitive overload can really kick in. For many, it's too much. There is a danger in making assumptions that as ‘digital natives’ that these kids, have the technical know-how, that they're going to love virtual learning, but it's not true. And that just means you really do need to ease them in through adequate training. And more importantly, you have to really make them see how virtual worlds and learning can benefit them. This can help them overcome technical challenges.

SK: How do students react when they find out that their male Chinese lecturer in Second Life has a female avatar?

SG: They do a double take when they realise that the female character in there is me. Not that they interact that much with her. Strangely, you would be surprised how many of the guys just naturally opt for female avatars anyhow, without me saying anything. Playing with avatar gender fluidity is a part of learning in a virtual world. One day they can be a female or the next day a giant dragon. It's about play and engagement, breaking expectations.

SK: Do you see some place for literature and the arts in language education?

SG: Yes. What is the connection between my area, education and the overall theme of the festival, you know - literature, performance, that sort of thing? It's interesting to think about. A Balinese professor, Dr Nyoman Sedana, while here as part of the festival, trained some Singaporean dance students in traditional Balinese monkey chorus, then also gave an academic presentation on traditional Balinese dance. He made a point which I think to me sums up everything I do in the virtual world in terms of education. What he said was that, unlike in the West where when you go to a performance and you're just a member of the audience and sit there and watch and in a fairly passive way, with traditional Balinese dance or shadow puppetry you're actually a participant in the performance and that is what is expected of you. By taking students into virtual worlds they can't be passive, they have to be active. They have to engage; they have to be participants in the storyline. For example, during our

virtual lessons, we do have these mini roleplay stories. It's not just random, they are part of a bigger story. I tell them that they are a student who travels to and is studying in China. Then, we have a kind of subplot which is the specific task with it's own mini storyline that they have to complete. I think that that really in some ways is the crossover into a bigger world of literature and performance and so on.

SK: So, it's language-learning through story engagement?

SG: The story is such an important part of education. Designing Chinese Island I am able to bring the students a lot of my own personal experience from China into that environment so that what they are doing is not just something completely abstract. I mean in a sense, you know, the textbook does tend to be a little bit abstract. The great thing for me has been when I've had emails, like from former student this year who emailed me saying, "Oh my God, I was in China and unfortunately got sick and had to go and see the doctor. And you know what? I actually knew what to do when I got to the clinic." So, from that perspective, it's certain there are crossovers. I would like to bring more Chinese culture into what we do and bring more performance into the cultural side. One of the festival items that was personally very relevant to me as a teacher of Chinese language and culture was seeing the Teochew opera performance. Teochew is the name of a city in China and the dialect the inhabitants speak. The opera itself is very well known in China with two mythical characters, a bit like Romeo and Juliet. However, the female character in this story has to dress as and pretend to be a male. Hence, you can see and hear virtual worlds right there. Historically, women were not encouraged to go and study. She pulls it off, fooling everyone. Yes, she gets to study, but at the same time falls in love with her male classmate who doesn't know that she's female. And so, the story goes through all of that romantic angst. That's the kind of cultural experience that I'd love to expose my students to. Yes, I can show them videos or take them to a live performance in Melbourne, but this would be really problematic logistically. Something like this can be staged in the virtual world relatively easily without much cost. Students could attend as a live event and would actually be able to interact with the performance as well. I have seen many theatre productions in Second Life. This is where virtual art and virtual education can meet.

SK: Thanks Dr Grant for your educational perspective. Second Life and next generation virtual worlds like Sansar don't sound so far removed now from a literature and performance festival like Lit Up. Dr Mooney-Singh do you have anything to add?

CMS: Well, you see we put this festival together with three linked concepts: water, city and sky because we are in Southeast Asia. This whole region is still known as a major trade route, for example, oil from the Arab countries comes to a refinery on the northwestern side of Singapore and then passes through the Malacca Straits between Malaysia and Indonesia then on to Europe. This whole region was the nautical Silk Road of history after the land Silk Road became somewhat obsolete when Vasco da Gama sailed from Portugal to Asia around Africa in 1497. And before that, South Indian explorers and traders colonised this area along with Chinese traders. For millennia, in fact, people from different cultures have been coexisting in this region. hence, “Water” represents the historical past, “City” speaks to what is happening today and “Sky” is the future. That is virtual terrain.

SK: As a documentary filmmaker who reports on virtual world activities how do you visualise the oral and physical traditions of South-East could be more immersive and interactive?

BD: The thing that excites me is that you have a living culture that has preserved its traditions here, Bali, for example Bali. It seems to be a microcosm of what this whole region was like a thousand years ago and it's still intact. One of those traditions is mask theatre like commedia dell'Arte in Italy. Topeng, I've learned is theatre for the masses and central to all ritual worship. It's not just 'art'. That seems to me to be something like avatar roleplay. Are we not also engaged in mask theatre in our virtual domains? It would be very forward thinking to use motion capture technology to film in 3D those traditional dances and to be able to preserve them in this age of globalization where traditions and languages are dying before our eyes. One of the Balinese dances performed by a young girl and her mother summed up perfectly this process of virtuality. A bird from Heaven comes down and the young girl is about to depart the body and be taken on another journey. In a sense, that is our virtual gender. I see a stylized bird is now going to take us to another level and that level is where we can continue this play, this game. As a European I was taught that we have a superior culture and we called these people “poor” or “inferior, backwards” and gave them all our stuff. Well here's the irony: during Lit Up I saw how a group of mime artists called Teater Kini Berseri performed two pieces - one following Balinese topeng mime and another using white-faced Marcel Marceau-style comedy and movement. Due to their training and background they were easily able to adapt it from You Tube. In other words, they have taken something from the West and made it their own, which is a healthy burglary without losing their own culture.

SK: The word “globalization” has become a kind of bogeyman. Do you agree, Bernhard?

BH: It's interesting that there is this fear about losing one's own cultural identity when you expose it to something else as if it was some sort of virus. I think this is really the biggest problem of today - that we're retreating from some cultures out of misplaced political correctness, while on the other hand some white cultures are so threatened by the exposure bug. The Silk Road of old was a two-way street. Cultures invigorated each other. That was evident during Lit Up - seeing how young people were mashing up the 21st Century with their past. If these were brought into a virtual world the viewership could be significantly multiplied.

SK: So, what might be the takeaway for the next generation?

BD: Are they participating or just playing *Call of Duty* on PlayStation Four? They aren't significantly involved in user-created virtual worlds, but young people do go out to poetry slams and perform and have broad interests. Let's hope they haven't completely checked out from interactions with other generations or their own cultural heritage.