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EDITORIAL

Introduction

Frances Bell and Rhona Sharpe became co-editors of *ALT-J* in September 2007, experiencing generous support from the previous team of editors, Gráinne Conole, Martin Oliver and Jane Seale, during the handover period. With the support of the Editorial Board and ALT's new Director of Development, Mark van Harmelen and Publications Officer, Louise Ryan, we have a great opportunity to build on the many strengths introduced at *ALT-J* by the previous editors. My first venture was to commission a special issue on Learning and Teaching in Immersive Virtual Worlds, with Maggi Savin-Baden and Robert Ward as co-editors. Projects in immersive virtual worlds were proliferating, raising questions about the opportunities for learning offered by these new spaces, and how students and academics would respond to them. There was a place for the publication of early findings, and theories to guide and inform ongoing research. Are immersive virtual worlds 'disruptive technologies' (Bower and Christensen 1995)[1] in education? To answer this question, we need to pay close attention to their use in new applications, rather than in re-creations of traditional learning activities online.

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Learning and teaching in Immersive Virtual Worlds

This special issue comprises a number of exciting initiatives and developments that begin to put issues of learning in immersive virtual worlds centre stage. Although learning through specific types of serious games has been popular for some years, the pedagogical value of immersive worlds is currently not only inchoate but also under-researched. Whilst several of the articles here are not based on empirical research, what they do offer is new ways of considering the pedagogical purposes of using these kinds of digital spaces. The difficulty with the perception of immersive virtual worlds is that there is often a sense that they are seen as being dislocated from physical spaces, and yet they are not. Web spaces are largely viewed as necessarily freer locations where there is a sense that it is both possible and desirable to 'do things differently'. The consequence is that digital pedagogies tend to be, or at least feel, less ordered than much of face-to-face learning, forcing a reconsideration of how learning spaces in digital contexts are to be constituted (for further discussion on this see Savin-Baden 2007). Immersive virtual worlds demand that we confront the possibility of new types of visuality, literacy, pedagogy, representations of knowledge, communication and embodiment. Thus, as Pelletier has argued, "technologies are systems of cultural transmission, creating new contexts within which existing social interests express themselves" (2005, 12). Yet there remain conflicts about whether "pedagogy must lead the technology",

a stance Cousin (2005) believes has become something of a mantra. Although this position would seem plausible and convincing to adopt, it denies the difficulties inherent in putting technology in the lead. It seems that many of the difficulties about the reflexive relationship between pedagogy and technology stem from a failure to ask what might appear to be some straightforward questions, such as:

- What do we mean by pedagogy in immersive virtual worlds?
- For what is the *learning* technology to be used?
- Is it *learning* technology, *teaching* technology, technology to enhance teaching and learning, or something else?
- What is the relationship between the type of pedagogy to be adopted and the type of pedagogy currently being used?

Cousin (2005) also points out that technology is not just lying there waiting for pedagogues to put to good use – but it might be that that is how some innovators see the situation.

Knowledge to go, knowledge on the move is embodied by open source systems and in particular Web 2.0 technologies, with their emphasis on user-generated content. Yet what remains problematic is students' engagement with immersive worlds: there seems to be a marked contrast between how such spaces are used by students within the university and what they do outside formal learning environments. We hope that through this special issue some of the queries and questions raised here will promote engagement in ongoing debates that begin to move forward both the arguments and practices, in interesting and innovative ways.

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Note
1. Bower and Christensen characterise a disruptive technology as one that is initially tolerated only in new markets and application, yet may subsequently enter the mainstream.

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