

The Third Culture: The Globalized Virtual World Visual Culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to improve the understanding of how users of online virtual worlds learn and/or relearn 'culture' through the use of visual components. The goal of this research is to investigate whether culturally and historically authentic imagery is necessary for users to understand the virtual world; how virtual world residents form and reform their virtual culture; and whether the visual culture in the virtual world is imported from the real world, colonized by any dominate culture, or assimilated into a new culture. The main research question is: Is the authenticity of cultural imagery important to virtual world residents? This study uses the mixed method of concurrent triangulation strategy. I used random sampling and a survey to gather quantitative results and I collected qualitative data from interviews exploring the experiences of virtual world residents with visual culture. This paper discusses the research findings in three categories: cultural interpretation and stereotypes; authenticity of imagery; and culture appropriation. This paper also identifies implications for art education and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Third culture, virtual world, visual culture, culture of tolerance, Second Life

Introduction

3D animated virtual worlds are new habitats for contemporary people. Because globalized virtual world content creators come from locations around the world and from diverse cultural backgrounds, visual communication in the virtual world is complicated. The purpose of this research is to improve the understanding of how users of online virtual worlds learn and/or relearn 'culture' through the use of visual components. The goal of this research is to investigate whether culturally and historically authentic imagery is necessary for users to understand the virtual world; how virtual world residents form and reform their virtual culture; and whether the visual culture in the virtual world is imported from the real world, colonized by any dominate culture, or assimilated into a new culture. The main research question is: Is the authenticity of cultural imagery important to virtual world residents?

Background

3D animated virtual worlds such as Second Life and Open Simulator are new habitats for contemporary people (McLeod, Liu, & Axline, 2014; Wasko, Teigland, Leidner, & Jarvenpaa, 2011; Edwards, 2006). These virtual worlds lack a storyline; users socialize, travel, and explore their creativity in the virtual world globally. Globalized virtual worlds allow people who live in different physical locations to communicate and learn from each other through the use of images, despite differences in their cultural backgrounds (Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2011; Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012). In these globalized virtual worlds, each resident has the freedom to reconstruct a realistic environment, create a world inspired by science fiction, or construct an imaginary, artistic atmosphere. The globalized virtual world provides vast possibilities for visual expression (Burnett, 2002).

Because globalized virtual world content creators come from locations around the world and from diverse cultural backgrounds, visual communication

in the virtual world is not limited by geographic location, and can become more complex than in the real world (Han, 2015; Han, 2013a; Han, 2013b). All 3D globalized virtual world images, such as costumes, architecture, and even ordinary decorations, are influenced by the cultural backgrounds of their creators. Images are influential (Mirzoeff, 2005); people learn and develop their own ideology or knowledge based on what they have seen. Therefore, it is imperative to note the importance of visual culture in globalized virtual worlds.

The goal of this paper is to present the findings of this research with a discussion that asks: Is the authenticity of cultural imagery important to virtual world residents? The research findings will be discussed in three categories: cultural interpretation and stereotypes; culture colonization and assimilation; and authenticity of imagery.

In my previous research, I found that users in the globalized virtual world unconsciously learn from the images they see, and how they understand images may not necessarily follow the original meaning intended by the creator of those images (Han, 2010). However, no matter what images users see in the virtual world and what they think the images mean, these images will influence how they see and how they think about images in the future (Burnett, 2004). Therefore, understanding how visual culture is perceived in the globalized virtual world is crucial to building connections between visual culture in the virtual world and in the real world.

Literature Review

Virtual

When users spend extensive amounts of time in a virtual world, they may view the virtual world as reality; however, for Home (1986), “realities by which we see existence are not really reality but an intellectual creation” (as cited in Anyanwu, 1998, p. 150). As for Deleuzian, “the virtual is *real without being actual*” (Wallin, 2011, p. 107). Baudrillard (1994) proposed the theory of simulation and simulacra and noted that images have become more real

than reality today. A simulacrum is a representation that does not use reality as a reference; simulacra do not require any reference from reality (Baudrillard). Simulation replaces representation. Virtual worlds are not just simulated reality, but are places where users can together create a new reality (Burbules, 2006).

Moreover, virtual world users are interacting with people through machines. According to Lemke (1993), the virtual world reminds us that we are not “just organisms, we are organisms constituted by our interactions with our environments, and increasingly those environments are artificial” (p. 13). As Duncum (1999) states, “Reality has become images... instead of losing sight of the real, the real is being transformed into signs and images. Instead of images colonizing reality, reality is transformed” (p. 306).

Digital visual culture in a virtual world

In virtual worlds, everything is visualized, and nothing can be taken for granted. Mountains, lakes, rivers, trees and even grass are carefully planted by virtual world content creators. Vision is the major sense used in globalized virtual worlds (Dickey, 2005; Atlas & Putterman, 2011; Kaplan & Yankelovich, 2011). With little support from the other senses, residents of virtual worlds rely heavily on their vision to make sense of their surroundings (Han, 2015). However, when viewers look at the same image from different locations, times, moods, contexts, and situations, and when viewers' ages, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and geographical regions are different, the meaning of the image changes (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004).

“To look is an act of choice” (Berger, 1999, p. 106). People choose the image they are used to and/or interested in or they try to ignore images that are not familiar to them. Individuals' cultural backgrounds also influence their choice of view, and their cultural backgrounds alter a great proportion of the meanings of images as well (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004). People take “visual cues” from images. Virtual world residents look for realistic appearances in globalized virtual worlds regardless of whether the virtual world is a reconstructed real world city or an imaginary world. Images in the globalized

virtual world gain their value from their “accessibility, malleability, and information status” (Sturken, & Cartwright, p. 139). Images with different meanings coexist in the globalized virtual world, and the relationship between images and users is not direct or transparent (Burnett, 2004). When residents spend lengthy amounts of time in globalized virtual worlds, they begin to view the virtual world as reality (Mirzoeff, 2005). Many of the images found in globalized virtual worlds contain cultural meaning, which users may interpret as a true cultural representation (Han, 2010). This can create a problem of perpetuating incorrect stereotypes of cultures.

Culture in globalized virtual worlds is as diverse as in the real world. Globalized virtual world residents come from around the world to form different communities, including but not limited to: geographically based communities, historically based communities, religious communities, interest based communities, commercial based communities, and role play based communities (Porter, 2013; Kiesler, 2014). These communities represent a complex global culture that only exists in virtual worlds (Shifman, 2013). Culture can be easily transmitted through technology, especially in the globalized virtual world. As Evans and Hall (2005) state, seeing is a “cultural practice” (p. 310). And when residents in the globalized virtual world come from various geographic locations and cultural backgrounds, they may have different understandings and experiences regarding the same image (Machin & Leeuwen, 2007).

Culture and the Third Culture

In human culture, people create sign systems to visually represent, record, and make sense of the world geographically and historically (Bolter, 2003; Jamieson, 2007; Semali, 2002; Smith-Shank, 2007). Culture is an arbitrary sign system; it is not stable, but is a process (Jafari & Goulding, 2013). The meaning of culture is always changing and may be modified by images from different cultures; cultural meaning is the result of interactions between images, culture, products, creators, and viewers (Sturken, & Cartwright, 2004).

As Sturken and Cartwright (2004) state, “Images are not only produced and consumed, they also circulate within cultures and across cultural boundaries” (p. 315). McFee and Degge (1977) note that signs and ideas are fundamentally inseparable in each culture because culture is the process of human behaviors, ideas, and values that are shared by the same group. In other words, when humans create signs, these signs are arbitrary and culturally bound because the sign systems are based on a shared cultural background (Dewey, 1934; Denis, 1989). Images form cultural identities and serve a particular meaning within one culture; the fundamental value of an image is the meaning the image carries (Burnett, 2004; Duncum, 1997). Viewers and images are “codependent” (Hayles, 1999, p. 20) because the meaning of images changes with culture over time. When images are seen at different times or in different places, they may tell viewers a different story (Pettersson, 1993; Smith-Shank, 2007). In other words, images reflect who the viewer is by how the viewer understands and interprets the meaning in images (McFee & Degge; Mitchell, 2005).

Culture is about who we are and how we live our lives. The First Culture is defined in this paper as the Heritage Culture (Efland, Freedman, Stuhr, 1996), also known as Macroculture (Wang, 2001). This is the dominant culture that people live in and this culture influences the majority of the people. The Second Culture is the Interest Groups (Efland, Freedman, Stuhr, 1996), also known as the Subcultures (Wang, 2001). According to Mercer (1958), subcultures are subgroups in a society; each of the groups has its own characteristics and ways of thinking and acting (as cited in Yinger, 1960).

Unlike the Second Culture, the Third Culture is not just an online interest group, it is an intercultural, worldwide mix of cultures that happened to be online (Han, 2010). It exists in globalized virtual worlds that are created by users who speak different textual languages. Because the Third Culture cannot be language dependent, users learn primarily about each other’s culture through their sense of vision, whether the information learned is culturally authentic or not. Immersed in the Third Culture, users learn and

relearn multiple meanings and contradictions of imagery. In the Third Culture, the meanings of images, built by users, are negotiated by Third Culture residents as they create their culture.

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Research Method

This study uses the mixed method of concurrent triangulation strategy, two methods that “confirm, cross validate, and corroborate findings” within this study (Creswell, 2003, p. 217). The participants of this research were Second Life users who had lived in at least two different countries for at least 6 months. This prerequisite helped me to find participants who had experienced at least two different cultures, and who should also be able to compare their real world cultural experiences with their virtual world cultural experiences. I used random sampling and a survey to gather quantitative results and I collected qualitative data from interviews exploring the experiences of virtual world residents with visual culture.

Through the detailed survey, I gained a general idea about the users’ visual preferences in the virtual world and about their cultural background. I also gained insight into the virtual world participants’ preference and understanding of cultural imagery. Through a semi-structured interview, I uncovered specific ideas about users’ visual preferences and visual cultural awareness in the virtual world.

The interview process began with a total of 29 valid respondent survey participants. Out of this group came twelve interview participants who took the survey and made an appointment to complete the follow up interview. Most of the research participants had been in Second Life for more than 3 years; that is to say, they knew Second Life culture quite well. All participants were Caucasian, with the majority of the participants living in North America, followed by Europe. However, the countries in which the participants were born, and those in which they have lived for more than 6 months, are across the globe.

Findings and Discussions

I have divided the presentation and discussion of the findings into three categories: cultural interpretation and stereotypes; authenticity of imagery; and culture appropriation.

Cultural interpretation and stereotypes

Throughout this research, I noticed four broad factors influencing the cultural authenticity of places constructed in Second Life: the purpose of a place, the limitations of the virtual world, the importance of details, and seeing from other avatars' points of view.

When discussing *the purpose of a place*, many of interview participants agreed that: "If the purpose of a place is not educational, it is not important [for it] to be authentic." In response to the question: "Which country you have lived in that has been reconstructed in Second Life?" Many survey participants thought the country's culture was presented truthfully in Second Life (see Figure 1). I also asked: "If the culture was not represented truthfully, how did you feel?" The participants responded with the following: "mildly amused"; "disappointed, but not worried"; or that "It was mostly a Western interpretation."

Do you think the culture you have lived in was represented truthfully in Second Life?

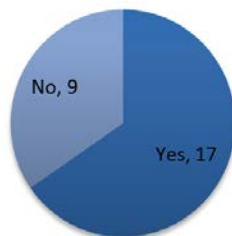


Figure 1 Do you think the culture you have lived in was represented truthfully in Second Life?

From these findings we can see that out of twenty-six survey participants, seventeen participants think the globalized virtual world is presenting cultures truthfully. When they view a culture that is not presented truthfully, they are not worried, and think the purpose of a place is more important. They do agree that if a place is educational, it is important for it to be authentic. In other words, if a globalized virtual world is not educational, residents of that virtual world will have an open mind to seeing cultures presented from different perspectives. As previous literature (Han, 2010) confirms, it is important to present culturally authentic imagery in an educational environment in the virtual world.

The second influential factor was *the limitations of the virtual world*. Since most of the participants were content creators in Second Life, they understood the limitations of building in Second Life. Therefore, even though the respondents did research prior to building, not all the participants thought it was important to be culturally authentic when building (see figure 2). As one survey participant stated: “SL has strict limitations so sims are too often too ambitious and cannot be completed with the necessary detail within the space or prim limitations” or that “it’s a reflection, not meant to be a carbon copy.”

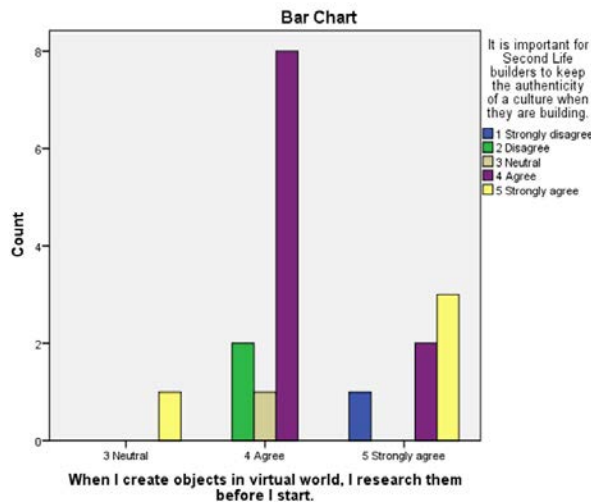


Figure 2 Cross table it is important for Second Life builders to keep the authenticity of a culture when they are building, and When I create objects in the virtual world, I research them before I start

From the participant responses, we can see that, because of the virtual world limitations, even content creators research the subject before they build, and it is not easy to keep the imagery culturally authentic. Content creators use their own understanding and knowledge to interpret cultural objects within the limitations of the virtual world. Moreover, content creators might not come from the same cultural background as the object they are making. Therefore, when content creators interpret cultural objects with a limited understanding of the culture, stereotypes or misunderstandings may be communicated through the object.

Participants emphasized *the importance of details*. When asked about visual quality and the environment, survey participants agreed on the importance of visual quality (see Figure 3). The cultural information represented in virtual builds was important to the participants. Additionally, as participants stated, visual objects in Second Life do help Second Life residents learn about other cultures.

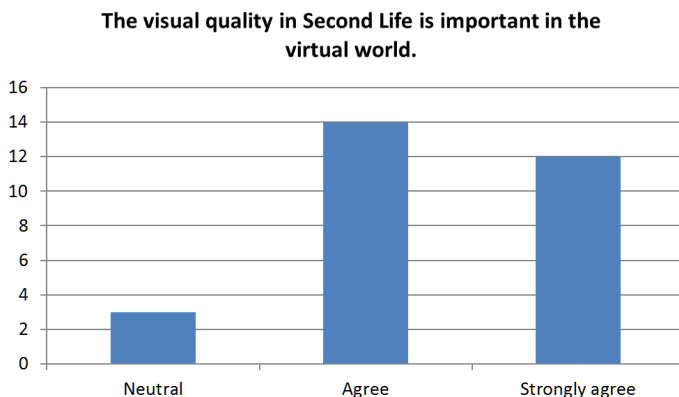


Figure 3 The visual quality in Second Life is important in the virtual world

When we look, we are looking for visual references we can believe (Burnett, 2004), especially in a globalized virtual world. Details in objects connect to visual references and make objects believable. When the details of visual objects are one of the ways through which virtual world residents can learn about other cultures, and when these objects are also limited by

virtual world constraints, virtual world residents are learning about other cultures through the lens of the content creator.

In keeping with the lens of the content creator described above, some participants pointed out the problem of learning about other cultures in Second Life from ***other avatars' points of view***. When I asked, "Do you think people are able understand a culture from a Second Life exploration experience?" most people said no. Most participants thought interaction was the best method for learning about a culture, but they felt it was missing in Second Life. Participants stated that they learned about other cultures in Second Life primarily by chatting with avatars, followed by visiting virtual constructions (see Figure 4). Participants also noted that, when we learn from virtual constructions, we are viewing what the creators see, and when we learn by chatting with an avatar, we are learning from that person's point of view. As one interview participant stated: "I constructed this from my experience...However...you inspect my work entirely in light of your own experience... Some of that comes from your SL perspective... But most, I think, comes from your RL perspectives...)" Many of the interview participants indicated that it was not enough to understand a culture just by visiting a virtual environment. Interacting, chatting, discussing, and even looking online for more information were necessary. However, many of the participants also agreed that the virtual environment is a good starting point for people to become interested in a place and begin looking for more information.

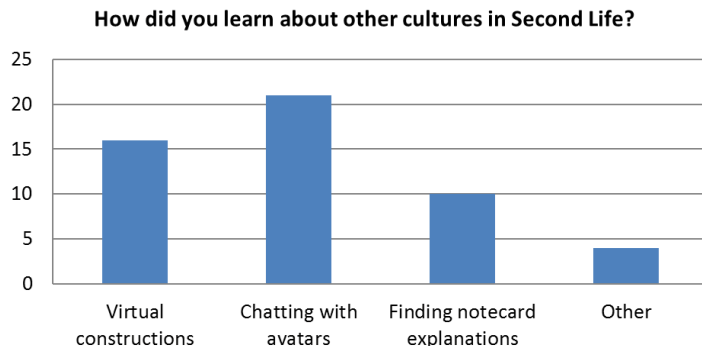


Figure 4 How did you learn about other cultures in Second Life?¹

Many interview participants are conscious that, in a globalized virtual world, they are constantly learning from other people’s points of view. However, they do not think this is a problem. Participants understand that culture interpretations are being made by content creators, as well as by the avatars that they have conversations with. Participants are open-minded about learning from the virtual world, but they also consciously know that they are learning from other people’s cultural interpretations and appropriations.

Authenticity of imagery

Almost all the participants were content creators in Second Life. So it was very interesting to find out that some participants disagreed with the statement: “It is important to create culturally authentic objects.” However, when presented with the statement: “When I create objects in virtual world, I research them before I start,” almost all the participants agreed (see figure 2). As the participants indicated, the virtual world has its limitations; it is not easy to create exactly the same thing in the virtual world as in the real world. Also,

¹ In the virtual world, when creators create objects, they are able to insert a notecard in the virtual object to explain the meaning of the object or environment, or the purpose of the environment. This is like the information card displayed in a gallery next to an artwork.

because each creator has a point of view, in the virtual world, globalized virtual world residents are looking through the creator's perspective.

From the survey answers we can see that, because the participants were also content creators who knew the limitations of virtual worlds, they did not think cultural authenticity was the first priority when viewing and immersively experiencing a globalized virtual world. Most content creators do research the objects that they are going to create prior to creating them; however, the creation of virtual objects is limited and restricted by the virtual environment. Therefore, creators use their own creative interpretations to resolve these problems. These creative interpretations may result in cultural appropriation and may involve personal interpretations; however, since the globalized virtual world is not a replica of the real world, globalized virtual world residents are open-minded about seeing creative interpretations from content creators.

One key word emerges from the data - tolerance. All research participants are experienced users of Second Life and they know how to build. They understand the limitations of the virtual world. They are tolerant of other people's builds, but they also do research and challenge themselves to make objects as culturally authentic as possible. They indicated that if a place is not designated for education or does not intend to present a culture, it does not need to be authentic. Because residents know that virtual builds have limitations and each object is created from a builder's point of view, it is not necessary for residents to critically look in the virtual world, but instead they can become immersed in the creative virtual environment. In short, the research participants are tolerant of imagery that is not authentic and agree that immersing in a creative virtual world is more important than critically reviewing it.

Let me conclude this section by answering the main research question: Is the authenticity of cultural imagery important to virtual world residences? According to the participants-No, the authenticity of cultural imagery is not the most important thing in the globalized virtual world. Globalized virtual

world residents are more open-minded and tolerant of non-authentic imagery.

Culture appropriation

Out of twenty-three participants, fifteen survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that culture in the virtual world is converging, and most of the interview participants thought there is a dominant culture in the virtual world. According to the survey results, Western culture is the dominant culture in the virtual world (see Figure 5). In the interviews, participants provided some examples such as “I view the [virtual] world itself as developing a new culture. One where you seek out and make communities of your own making. Make your own tribe. Find people who share your passions and can help realize a vision.” “We have some people who have created their own culture... They enjoy immersing in it. Exploring from the inside.” “Mostly we share a community and a setting... It is a group of people that share and interact... In a way, it is its own culture with its own mores and traditions.” “I think that there is one building...coming to life... I think it is a natural evolution, too. I think it may either be leading real life...or maybe echoing it.”

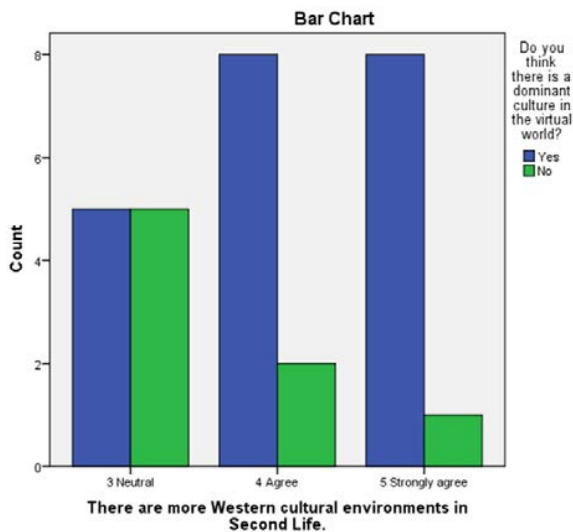


Figure 5 Crosstable of Do you think there is a dominant culture in the virtual world? and There are more Western culture environments in Second Life.

From these findings I conclude that visual culture in globalized virtual worlds is a creative world with real world references. A globalized virtual world is a world from the creator's point of view, and the virtual worlds are viewed very differently from person to person because of their diverse cultural backgrounds. Virtual world content creators are creating a world from their own cultural and personal backgrounds. Every object comes from a creator's mind. However, without real world references, the globalized virtual world would not be able to provide an immersive feeling for residents. Every object that exists in a virtual world needs to make sense to be believable. The virtual builds can be visually similar, or sometimes authentic, to the real world, but the atmosphere of the real world is not easily recreated. The amount of real world references within a virtual environment depends on the content creators' mind. Given virtual world building limitations and the use of real world visual references for virtual worlds, content creators need to be creative to produce virtual builds.

Art Education Implication and Future Research

Art education implication

Teaching visual culture in the virtual world teaches students to keep in mind the limitations of virtual worlds and the realization that content creators have their own perspectives for viewing the world. Teaching visual culture in the globalized virtual world not only teaches students to critically view and analyze virtual imagery, but also teaches visual culture tolerance.

Today, we are moving from consumer culture to participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). When participatory culture becomes the mainstream culture, the power of grassroots cannot be underestimated. As art educators, our students are creating the participatory culture, and they are the power of grassroots. Teaching students how to create culturally authentic imagery and critically look at imagery is ideal for participation in this culture. Concurrently, educating students about the limitations of participatory culture, with a critical but also tolerant way of looking, is important. Finally, teaching

students how to use creative means to resolve the limitations that can occur while creating imagery is an imperative task for all art educators.

Future research

With these findings in mind, I offer recommendations for future research: What do virtual world land/community owners² think about culture in the virtual world? This line of inquiry will help researchers understand how these owners manage their land and community, and how their ways of management may influence their community. Additionally, many people find the boundaries between the virtual and real world are becoming blurred. It would be helpful to know if a third culture exists in the real world as well. If it does, we might be able to predict the future direction of our real world cultures from our virtual world experience.

Conclusion

Visual culture in virtual worlds is creative with real world references. A virtual world is a world built from a creator's point of view, and virtual worlds are viewed differently by people who come from diverse cultural backgrounds (Han, 2010). Virtual world content creators create a world out of nothing, but every single object is a creation of the builder's mind. Every object that exists in a virtual world needs to make sense to be believable. Because of virtual world building limitations, content creators also must solve problems creatively (Gill, 2014). The real world is a visual reference of the virtual world. Although virtual builds can be visually similar and sometimes even authentic to the real world, the atmosphere of the real world is difficult to recreate. But, without the real world as a reference, the virtual world cannot provide an immersive experience for its residents. The percentage of real world references is up to the builder's discretion. As the research data

² Virtual world land/community owners are the hosts of virtual world lands and communities. They have the right to decide who can join a community or access the land. Each community and land has its own rules.

indicate, the virtual world is heavily influenced by Western culture. But, because the real world cannot be recreated authentically in the virtual world, the virtual world is also forming a new culture. This is a culture of tolerance.

Culture is a product of our lives (McFee, & Degge, 1977). Our lives have roots. And these roots are something that cannot be replaced or fully changed. Visual culture is the same (Mirzoeff, 2005). People live together and do things together. We converge our cultures to a certain degree; however, we do not replace one culture with another. In the third culture, cultures do not fully converge, but instead they become entangled (Han, 2010). Each culture must transform when existing in the third culture, to be able to exist, communicate, and survive. Because so many diverse sub-cultures have become important components of the third culture, the third culture accepts all cultures and allows them to grow. The residents of the third culture live together and do things together, but without losing the connection to each of their own (sub)cultural backgrounds. And so they respect each other's culture. However, their roots will never be totally changed. Their roots are based on their diverse life experiences. Without respect, the residents of the third culture would not be able to survive in their shared virtual spaces. They must learn from their virtual environment to understand it. This leads to more acceptance, more understanding, and less judgement, not only in life, but also in visual culture. Residents of the third culture understand the real and virtual, they allow for space between the real and the virtual.

The globalized virtual world is not a mere recreation of reality or a reconstruction of one of the real world cultures. The globalized virtual world is creating a new culture, the third culture. This is a culture with tolerance. The globalized virtual world visual culture is a third culture of tolerance. In conclusion, teaching visual culture in the virtual world teaches students to keep in mind the limitations of virtual worlds and to remember that content creators have their own perspectives for viewing the world. Teaching visual culture in virtual worlds promotes a culture of tolerance.

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