During the fall of 2006, I received a generous Fletcher Jones grant through the Otis College of Art and Design TLC (teaching and learning center) in order to take the time to delve into academic concepts regarding virtual worlds and their uses for student learning. This may seem unnecessary to some. However, I am from, ahem, a slightly older population than the typical Otis student. I do not have a my Space page, I have never text-messaged, do not own a Playstation and only play computer games with my 5 year old daughter. So, yes, I know every Spongebob, Dora, and Barbie game online, but was quite ignorant regarding World of Warcraft, and the SIMS online. I only use the internet for email and shopping! Way too much shopping!

So, back to reality, or unreality – as it were. How do we define such spaces? According to Richard Bartle, author of the seminal book, Designing Virtual Worlds, “Virtual Worlds are places where the imaginary meets the real.” He means, only on the computer. Otherwise that describes Disneyland, all fictional books and films, Star Trek conventions and Renaissance Faires. According to Bartle, those spaces are also shared, persistent (they continue to exist whether or not a person is playing there) and interaction there occurs in real time.

I discovered several things about virtual worlds. First, that there is actually a historical timeline of these sites, and that many users (our students) are unaware of this. Second, there are multiple literary antecedents to these worlds, and again, most are unaware of these connections. Third, there are a multitude of uses for virtual worlds, and only a few are in use in our educational environment.

Historically, virtual worlds can be traced back, conceptually at least, to the 1940’s. The first email program, called ‘mailbox’ was installed in the early 1960’s at MIT and worked on only one computer. Users left messages for other users who would access the computer at different times. People began playing games via computer throughout that decade. The government’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) connected four major U.S. universities online in 1969, ostensibly so that there would be a communications network in the event of a military attack on our country. Atari was founded in 1970, Dungeons and Dragons was published in 1974 and multi-user dungeons (virtual spaces) began to be established throughout the 1970’s. Now of course, we have a multitude of virtual worlds, often called massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

Many people perceive virtual worlds to be a postmodern popup creation, and often don’t realize that they have literary connections.. Many of these spaces use complex mythological worlds as an influence. Others use the orcs and elves of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Others are based wholly on such fictional spaces as Terry Pratchett’s Discworld or Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series. Also, fiction writers have been discussing virtual worlds for a while. Vernor Vinge published True Names in 1981,
Giving virtual world’s magical imagery still used today to discuss the seemingly unbelievable computer ‘wizardry’ occurring constantly. 1984’s Neuromancer, by William Gibson, coined the term ‘cyberspace’. Neal Stephenson published Snow Crash in 1992. His novel featured users who could wear a set of goggles hooked into a computer and thereby enter the virtual Street, where they would interact with others all over the world. He popularized both the idea of a virtual world that was real enough to work and partially live in and the use of the term avatar to refer to a person’s online persona or skin.

As I discovered, students don’t know about this history and most have told me they don’t care. To them, the internet was always there, World of Warcraft and the SIMS are part of their childhood memories. It all simply is. Virtual worlds are not spaces they tend to question and analyze, but they sure do use them. Predominantly, students use them for play, inspiration, social networking and for business contacts. They are also used as professional spaces by advertisers and the military (to train pilots and fighters). Healthcare professionals have created games where, for example, kids undergoing chemotherapy can ‘blast away’ their own cancer cells, thus giving them a mental leg up on the disease. They are used to learn about the world or find a random geographical point. As for educators, most of us don’t take advantage of the spaces provided, let alone use them to create. We tend to utilize them in a piecemeal fashion. We’ll show a YouTube clip, share a blog or podcast with students. There are many exciting things on the technological horizon, however, that probably will provide inspiration. For example, the Otis library has created a virtual Otis in the world called Second Life. This is an amazing place where the user can be a virtual vampire, fox, alien or human and interact with others, shop, learn, go to museums, etc. Eventually, when technology catches up, classes may be able to meet in such spaces to see a concert, view art, show our own art, and talk. Such uses seem to be right around the corner. For myself, I am waiting for the real plug-in. Science fiction has created virtual worlds that are so cool, so real, and so potentially scary that the current mode of play, from typing in words and having to wait for the resolution on your avatar to resolve are all kind of annoying. When technology catches up to fiction, that’s where the excitement and truly frightening potential of these spaces will arrive.

One of the intriguing things about these spaces for me is their seemingly magical aspects. We have imbued computers and these virtual spaces with supernatural language and concepts. There are computer hackers who are demons that control reality from afar. There are computer wizards that make things happen that the uninitiated find astonishing. We all hold passwords, hiding our names. In many magical systems, if a magic practitioner holds a person’s real name, they can cause much chaos for that individual. We use a mouse and point and click, causing things to happen far away in a manner that calls to mind poking a vodou doll with pins. Sometimes our computers are bugged up in a way that makes me think the dratted machines are cognizant or at least the temporary homes of wandering souls. Some of us even give names and thus some semblance of spirit to our computers. Within virtual worlds we materialize wherever and whenever we want. A tremendous amount of these worlds are based on magical and mythical characters and ideas. Why so many fairies, vampires, dragons, orcs, demons, etc.? We could just as easily be rats and robots. I think all of this says something about a shift in thinking. Societies generally evidence a worldview that is usually only apparent at some point in the future. I think this generation has shifted from a scientific to a magical worldview. Spiritualism has made a comeback, devils, resurrections and deities in the pizza are rampant. People ‘believe’ in the unseen again and I believe this is evidenced through virtual worlds. It’s much easier to strive for a utopia online than by creating a cult somewhere in Montana. Many people manifest their belief in the unknown through their religious structures and their folk beliefs. For many of us, the scientific spaces within the computer offer this ironic outlet instead. That way, our subconscious is shedding the daemons and the conscious mind need never admit it! I could be wrong, but it seems to me that the most logical and mathematical spaces in
the world have provided magic in a way that a church/temple/mosque never could. 
After all, even I have trouble materializing in the middle of church.

What I would eventually like to see in terms of virtual worlds and education is an
awareness and use of a magical perspective within these worlds and the classroom.
Why can’t we create virtual dragons for ourselves and our students to fly upon to get
the feeling of flight in a natural science class? Can students experience what it was
like to be an unlanded peasant in a virtual 15th century Wallachia and understand
what factors led to the beliefs in vampires? Can students upload fieldwork interviews
and integrate them easily into a space that calls to mind aspects of the interview? For
example, say a Cultural Studies student interviews their grandma from Sicily about
her immigration experience. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have her sitting and talking
in the midst of Sicily? Wouldn’t the other students ‘get it’ much better? I suppose
many of these things are possible now, but not done easily at all. They would be
enormously time intensive and probably buggy to run. But I hope this is the near
future of virtual worlds. I hope that we will be able to truly access the magic for our
students.