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REFLECTION

The satirical value of virtual worlds

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Imaginary worlds have been devised by artists and commentators for centuries to focus satirical attention on society's problems. The increasing sophistication of three-dimensional graphics software is generating comparable 'virtual worlds' for educational usage. Can such worlds play a satirical role suggesting developments in distance education practice and policy? The article examines the emergence of Hinterlife, a cartoon world run by a disarmingly despotic academic known to the real world only by his virtual name, Professor Horace. This article suggests that a healthy dose of satire can help distance education to overcome the problems generated in difficult economic times.

Keywords: graphic learning environments; virtual worlds; online learning; recession; diploma mills; plagiarism; burnout; mutual deprivation; shared misery; satire

Distance education (DE) needs satire. DE practitioners tend to take themselves quite seriously, as the articles in this journal, my own included, demonstrate; and they occasionally need a laugh. The academic world in general needs satire, especially if the academics can generate it themselves in response to the humorous observations about academia by writers such as Kingsley Amis (1954), David Lodge (1975), and Tom Sharpe (1976). In fact, the whole world needs satire if it helps to prevent complacency and stimulate progress. With these objectives, poets, playwrights, artists, actors, and musicians have used satirical wit since the days of ancient Greece. In imaginary worlds ranging from Inferno and Utopia, to Lilliput, Animal Farm, and Erewhon, they commonly depict conditions of apparent perfection in which all is not well, and where unquestioning compliance renders everyone a part of the problem. The academic literature has from time to time made use of the satirical tradition to expose contemporary problems: from 1959 to 1966 the *Worm Runner's Digest* gained a loyal following (Time.com, 1966; Wikipedia, 2009) until some readers complained that they needed clearer indications about which of its articles were serious and which were satirical. This may reflect a fundamental weakness of the academic mentality – the inability to see just how comical we actually are.

Today's educational world certainly has its share of problems, and is an easy target for dishonesty: for example, the plagiarism practices that have made the 'originality checking' service of Turnitin.com (2010) widely used; and the readily available diploma mill 'services' discussed in the Reflections article by Anthony Piña (2010).

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Such problems, notes Piña, are created by 'greedy and dishonest purveyors of worthless credentials and the questionable ethics of those who would knowingly purchase a bogus degree' (p. 121), and are facilitated by internal conditions in the educational system that should be rectified. Piña stresses the need 'to use quality as our most effective tactic' (p. 125) in combating such practices, and his observations have proved useful in quality control discussions at my own DE institution even before being published.

Satire in a period of recession

The issues currently under discussion at Athabasca University are doubtless similar to those of other academic institutions in times of recession: for example, increased workload; the pros and cons of 'repositioning' courses under different names to increase their international marketability; an apparent rise in student plagiarism; and the occasional blatant use by students of crib sites, more euphemistically known as custom essay writing and copying services. Owing to the systemic weaknesses of which Piña's Reflections (2010) have warned, decisions on how to deal with these issues can inadvertently lead to loss of academic quality and reputation, particularly when the system itself is under pressure. Specific threats to DE quality during the next 30 years were predicted by Guri-Rosenblit (2009) at the recent international forum held in Beijing, on DE's survival in a time of recession. Among them, Guri-Rosenblit predicted the likely rise of the diploma mill, teacher/student burnout, and the 'mutual deprivation' and 'shared misery' generated by over-standardized courses. In a recession, the pressures faced by students and teachers alike can be considerable, and every effort should be made to understand and sympathize with the factors that can compel some students to resort to such practices as plagiarism. 'Beyond this, however, a tough defence of one's own academic culture and standards may be the only option' (Baggaley & Spencer, 2005, p. 61).

For many educators, however, the unscrupulous thinking behind such practices is completely foreign, and the problems themselves are not fully recognized. A major historical goal of the satirist has been to bring hitherto dark practices to the surface, enabling solutions to them. Naturally, limits should be set to prevent satirical commentary from doing harm, and from transgressing the boundaries of cultural safety. The Greek satirist Archilochus (seventh century BC) had a venomous style, which, it is said, drove people to suicide. The Roman satirist Horace (65–8 BC) had an altogether more jocular tone. 'Although I portray examples of folly,' he said, 'I am not a prosecutor and I do not like to give pain; if I laugh at the nonsense I see about me, I am not motivated by malice' (Elliott, 2009). Academics are quite used to vitriolic comment from their experiences of it in learned conferences, with cultural variations in intensity depending on whether the meetings are held in, for example, Australia, Britain, or Canada. In the DE field, satire has important potential to relieve workload stress with small eureka moments, and to suggest witty retorts to DE's detractors in the educational mainstream. Unfortunately, educators in general tend to desist from publishing satirical observations – possibly owing to the lack of a section on satirical format in the sixth edition of the APA manual (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010).

Enter Professor Horace. This gentle little man introduced himself to me in December 2009, via his website at Hinterlife.com (2009–10), and the new text-to-movie software, Xtranormal (Xtranormal Technology, 2006–10). Now everyone can have their own virtual world, free from invasion by eccentric outsiders. In Horace's world, the workings

of a fictitious degree mill (Hinterlife University) are depicted in three-dimensional animation and glorious colour. Professor Horace tells me that the software enabled him to create Hinterlife – his answer to Dante's Inferno and Swift's Lilliput – in a couple of evenings (Horace, personal communication, December 15, 2009). His ancient Roman namesake would have loved our modern option of withdrawing to a secluded online world. 'Odi profanum vulgus et arceo,' he declared. 'I hate the vulgar crowd and keep them away' (Horace, 23 BC/2003b). As Professor Horace explains in the launch video about his new 3D environment on YouTube: 'The main difference between Hinterlife and Second Life is that Second Life has millions of subscribers, and Hinterlife has only one. Me' (profhorace, 2009).

The fascination of virtual worlds

I became interested in the Second Life phenomenon in 2006, not as a user, but as an observer of its obvious fascination for some of my students. I began to receive regular invitations to attend Second Life social events from people for whom I had never exercised any obvious social appeal in the real world. They seemed to want me to embrace their new virtual way of living, even at the risk of leaving no time for my real-life spare-time activities (concerts, drama productions, etc.). From my days in communication and media studies, I was already aware of the writings of Gurdjieff (*c.*1866–1949), and of his original use of the 'second life' concept as one of three stages of personal development. Gurdjieff wrote that, 'The second life phase is centered mainly in the collection of experiences, and in the conscious deepening of experiences' (Martin, 2006). I also knew that Gurdjieff had a profound influence on writers including Kipling, J.B. Priestley, and Aldous Huxley, and on controversial figures such as Ouspensky and L. Ron Hubbard (Brachish, 2004). I nonetheless resisted the temptations offered by the *fin de siècle* version of Second Life created by Linden Research, Inc. (n.d.), and got on with my DE work. To date, I have not succumbed to Second Life's attractions.

As I examined Professor Horace's virtual world concepts, however, I became intrigued and even mildly shocked by the attitudes that his online cartoon existence seemed to have kindled in him. The revelations in the Hinterlife videos about his despotic teaching practices, and his virtual-world dealings with students, his personal assistant, etc., were giving me ideas about online techniques and their jargon that I had never previously glimpsed. His attitude that 'I can do what I like behind this cartoon persona' both fascinated and appalled me; as did his often conflicting attitudes to junk email, plagiarism, and online degree mills, and the ulterior motives behind his advocacy of open access resources. Was Professor H. inspiring genuine paradigm shifts in me, or was I just imagining it?

I decided to explore this question in discussion with academic colleagues. Some were clearly as startled as I have been by Professor Horace's radical perspective. For others his videos seem to provide welcome reassurance that someone else shares their views. Evidently, I had not imagined the Professor's power to inspire reaction at both ends of the critical spectrum. Colleagues have suggested that I should write in depth about the Hinterlife phenomenon, reflecting on the educational potential of virtual worlds, the effective design of personal cartoon avatars, and so on. I have decided not to follow this advice, since it would require me to master a whole area of educational literature in which I have no interest. So in this Reflections article I have written about the phenomenon of educational satire in general terms. My reasoning is that writers, musicians, filmmakers, and cartoonists in the world outside academia are not obliged

to append analyses of their *métiers* whenever they publish their work; nor are those who comment on new works of art required to include learned dramaturgical or musicological analyses in their reviews. For the artist and the reviewer, it is the moment that counts – the current impact of an artist or artwork on its audience – opening the possibility for deeper research henceforward.

Conclusion: seizing the day

For me, that artist of the moment is Professor Horace, the elderly little character who has recently inspired and troubled me. His website (Hinterlife, 2009–10) has opened my eyes to aspects of online learning that I had not previously considered, and I conclude that the use of such imaginary worlds for satirical purposes has eye-opening potential. The Reflections section of this journal is an ideal and enlightened outlet for my preliminary reaction to the Hinterlife phenomenon. If for any reason I had hesitated to publish these reactions, the cartoon man, his topical observations, and his world might have faded into oblivion before my reactions could be disseminated.

I hope that others will join Professor Horace in addressing the threats to open and distance education that analysts are currently predicting: for example, rise of diploma mills, online plagiarism, overload, burnout, and the overall loss of quality generated by such issues. Times of economic and political hardship have traditionally presented ideal conditions for the emergence of radical and humorous art forms; and it is to be hoped that other subscribers to this journal will rally to the need for 'opinionated creative writing' (as one reviewer of this article has put it) 'to add some fun and value to the field.' I suspect that Horace of ancient Rome would agree with these sentiments. In his celebrated ode, 'Carpe Diem,' he too spoke of seizing the moment, of mixing (i.e., blending) experiences and tools, and of the need to set restricted but topical goals:

> Be wise, and mix the wine, since time is short: limit that far-reaching hope.
> The envious moment is flying now, now, while we're speaking:
> Seize the day, place in the hours that come as little faith as you can. (Horace, 23 BC/ 2003a)

To those seeking modern-day inspiration in their DE work, I say: take a look at Professor Horace's videos on YouTube and be nourished by them, adding of course a healthy grain of salt to anything he may suggest.

Notes on contributor

Jon Baggaley is professor of educational technology at Canada's Open University, in Athabasca, Alberta. His output includes less-than-serious videos, also available on YouTube, about the computerized Catholic confessional (1989), the automated life of the online educator (2003), and the futuristic concept of fingernail learning (2004). In May 2010, he will celebrate the bicentenary of the Luddite rebellion in an address at Global Learn: Asia Pacific 2010, the AACE Global Conference on Learning and Technology, in Penang, Malaysia. In October 2010, he will give a keynote paper at the Asian Association of Open Universities annual conference in Hanoi, Vietnam.

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