From Cultural Tolerance to Mutual Cultural Respect: An Asian Artist's Perspective on Virtual World Cultural Appropriation

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ABSTRACT

Culture is to be lived and to be learned. The connotation of cultural symbols is negotiated and learned within a culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004). When we are part of the dominant culture using another's cultural objects, we may not know the context of that object, which may lead to cultural appropriation. In this paper, I review appropriation through three different domains: appropriation in art, appropriation in media and technology, and appropriation in cultural studies. I specifically chose to use denotation and connotation as the means to analyze interview text and visual data because these two coding systems are able to draw the cultural meanings embedded in the texts beyond the surface level of understanding.

Findings can be categorized into three threads: 1) cultural appropriation in virtual worlds, 2) caring about cultural appropriation, and 3) solutions to cultural appropriation in virtual worlds. This research suggests that cultural exchange and mutual respect are the solutions to cultural appropriation in virtual worlds. Visual literacy will help virtual world residents learn how to read, see, decode, and create virtual imagery.

I have been conducting visual culture research in virtual worlds for ten years (Han, 2010, 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2017) and have found that a unique culture exists, which I call "Third Culture." This Third Culture is distinctly different from Pollock, Van Reken, and Pflüger's (2009) third culture kids. The Third Culture is an intercultural worldwide mix that exists in virtual worlds created by residents who speak different textual languages. In the Third Culture, the meanings of images are built and negotiated by its residents; these residents learn primarily about each other's cultures through visual imagery. Virtual world residents create and recreate their own and other cultures' visual representations to promote their virtual products or ideologies (Han, 2011; Han, 2017).

Today, images are crucial in the immersive virtual technology. Three dimensional images help users to feel immersed in different virtual venues, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality. When users are immersed in virtual environments, the boundaries between the real and the virtual are blurred (Burbules, 2006). Currently, High Fidelity (Rosedale, 2018), a 3D immersive virtual reality, allows users to use the virtual reality system to create in virtual worlds together, just like in the virtual world of Second Life. Besides, Sansar (Linden Lab, 2018), another user-created high visual quality virtual immersive virtual reality that can be accessed by both computers and the virtual reality system. The virtual worlds in Second Life continue to be one of the most easily accessible virtual technologies. Users do not require a headset or expensive equipment to access an immersive virtual environment. In this research, the term *virtual world* refers specifically to Second Life (SL), an open virtual world where residents present themselves through customized avatars and where all residents are able to create and contribute visually presented virtual builds. Entirely created by its residents, SL is an environment in which residents are able to immerse themselves and create their own community and even their own culture (Han, 2016a).

Evans and Hall (2005) state that seeing is a "cultural practice" (p. 310). Therefore, we should give the same, if not more, consideration to examining the visual culture formed in our virtual world experience as we give to our real world experience. Residents in virtual worlds such as Second Life come from various geographic locations and cultural backgrounds; they may have different understandings of and experiences with the same imagery (Machin & Leeuwen, 2007). Thus, the mixed and matched visual imagery created in the virtual world is often more culturally complex than the visual imagery of the real world. Due to the advancement of technology, virtual experiences are just as valid as real experiences (Riva, et al., 2010). In the real world, we examine the visual in popular culture–such as movies, advertisements, and music videos (Barnard, 1998; Duncum, 1997, 1999; Jenks, 1995)–for social justice, gender equality, and cultural understanding. As my previous research shows, virtual world residents prefer to visit a culture they are not familiar with (Han, 2010, 2016b). However, many virtual world creators build exotic cultural locations and objects for profit, without knowing the meaning of those cultural objects.

Most of my previous research participants were Westerners, and those research findings showed that Third Culture residents must learn to be more accepting, more understanding, and less judgemental of the virtual objects (Han, 2017). However, the few non-Westerners I interviewed did not agree with this statement. Therefore, this paper presents findings from a month-long, in-depth ethnographical (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) interview I conducted in Mandarin Chinese with an Asian virtual world artist.

Literature Review

In my previous research, I found that residents in the virtual world unconsciously learn from the images they encounter (Han, 2010). However, no matter what images residents see in the virtual world and what they think those images mean, those images influence how they see and understand images in the future–both in the virtual and the real world (Burnett, 2002; Han, 2011b). In this literature review, I discuss Third Culture in virtual worlds as well as appropriation in the field of art, media, and cultural studies to provide an overview of virtual world culture and the meaning of cultural appropriation.

Third Culture in Virtual Worlds

Culture in virtual worlds is as diverse as in the real world. Virtual world residents come from around the world to form different communities (Kiesler, 2014; Porter, 2013). Everything visualized is built by its users, and nothing can be taken for granted. "To look is an act of choice" (Berger, 1999, p. 106), and vision is the major sense used in virtual worlds (Atlas & Putterman, 2011; Dickey, 2005; Han, 2016a; Kaplan & Yankelovich, 2011). Images with different meanings coexist in the virtual world, and the relationship between images and residents is not direct or transparent (Burnett, 2004). Individuals' cultural backgrounds influence their choice of what and how they view, and their cultural backgrounds alter a great proportion of the meanings of the images (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004). When residents spend lengthy amounts of time in virtual worlds, they begin to view the virtual world as reality (Mirzoeff, 2005), but many of the images may contain cultural meaning. Residents may interpret these realities as a true cultural representation (Han, 2010). This can perpetuate incorrect stereotypes of cultures (Said, 1985).

The Third Culture

It is a psychological necessity for all human beings to belong to a culture, which is the "result of complex interactions among images, producers, cultural products, and readers/consumers. The meaning

of images emerges through these processes of interpretation, engagement, and negotiation" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004, p. 69). Cultural ideas and values are maintained by visual images because images can communicate, teach, and transmit the behavior, ideas, and values of a culture (McFee & Degge, 1977). McPhail (2002) contends that the virtual world is not only a subculture, but also a mainstream hyperculture shared by all online residents. The meaning of images among viewers and site designers exists in a simultaneous circulation within the virtual world (Appadurai, 2005). "Cultural identities emerge in everyday discourse and in social practices, as well as by rituals, norms, and myths that are handed down to new members" (Wang, 2001, p. 516). McFee and Degge (1977) state that "culture is a pattern of behaviors, ideas, and values shared by a group" (p. 272), and "each culture has its own individuality and has a pattern that binds its parts together" (Dewey, 1934, p. 349). In other words, people in the same culture have similar ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Wang, 2001).

Today, we are bombarded with a huge number of images that we have trouble comprehending (Metros, 1999). The line between virtual worlds and reality may become "perceptually nonexistent" (Barry, 1997, p. 61). As Baudrillard (2005) states, images have become more real than the reality today, as evident in his conceptualization of "the hyperreal." He cites television and Disney World as examples to explain how we lose our understanding of reality and the real experiences that images provide us (Baudrillard, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2005; Woolley, 1992). Because of the power of the simulated image, seeing is no longer believing (Lippit, 1994). In virtual worlds, all images are real without origin or reality; that is to say, everything is hyperreal (Baudrillard, 2005). According to Berger (1990), "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (p. 8).

Kellner (2006) states that the world is connected through the Internet, bringing different cultures together and creating a new culture. In the virtual world, "the processes of immigration and globalization lead to new 'third' identities that represent complex and shifting hybridizations of earlier cultural patterns" (Ess & Sudweeks, 2006, p. 181). Virtual worlds become a "ritualising phenomenon" (Anyanwu, 1998, p. 155) in which residents have to be initiated into one kind of shrine or another. In this way, the virtual world creates a unique Third Culture.

Appropriation

Appropriation is an important part of art history. From Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol, appropriation is covered by an artist's creative license (Graw, 2004). From Barthes' "Death of the Author" and "Birth of the Reader" to Baudrillard's (2005) simulation and simulacrum, appropriation is critical and meaningful. This article's purpose is not to discuss appropriation in fan art where the general public appropriates a mass media product (Deuze, 2008; Postigo, 2008). This paper focuses specifically on cultural appropriation in virtual worlds and analyzes virtual objects from the field of critical cultural studies perspectives using examples in virtual worlds for discussing cultural appropriation.

Below, I review appropriation through three different domains: appropriation in art; appropriation in media and technology; and appropriation in cultural studies. These three domains are not the same, but are essential for understanding the standpoint of this paper. Reviewing appropriation through these domains will provide a clear direction on what appropriation means as well as why research into cultural appropriation in the virtual world is crucial.

Appropriation in art. I use Nelson and Shiff's (2003) *Critical Terms for Art History* as the foundation of this section. In this book, Summers (2003) discusses representation, followed by Potts' (2003) sign, Camille's (2003) simulacrum, as well as Nelson's (2003) appropriation. In representation, Summers (2003) states, according to Descartes, "we are not using our eyes to see, but we are using our minds… Representations are primarily significant not only in terms of *what* is presented, but also in terms of *how* it is represented" (p. 14). Artwork reveals both personal and collective ways of seeing within the same culture. According to Summers, "the world is not simply projected from the mind; it is made, and even the simplest artifacts involve techniques of gathering and working as well as the teaching and transmission of these techniques" (p. 15). For Potts (2003), we only see the meaning of artwork through our cultural background; in other words, we are seeing artwork as a sign. Seeing an image as a sign means the image carries cultural meaning.

> Images now signify rather than represent, vaguely intuited stylistic conventions become semiotics structure, and a hunch about the kinds of meaning people in the past might have attributed to a motif becomes an exercise in the recovery of a cultural

code. (Potts, 2003, p. 21)

A simulacrum is an image that has no relation to the real world (Evans, 2009). According to Baudrillard (1999), a simulacrum is not unreal. It is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (p. 6). The "culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced" (Camille, 2003, p. 48) and cultural imagery becomes commodified. Such valuing allows appropriation to mean improperly taking, abducting, or stealing something for one's own use (Nelson, 2003; Rogers, 2006). "Appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, subjective, and motivated" (Nelson, 2003, p. 162). Appropriation is a misrepresentation, not a denial. In contemporary art, appropriation, such as "the readymade, collage and montage are presented as the three innovations of the historic avant-gardes….Without appropriation, contemporary art is unimaginable" (Evans, 2009, p. 15). However, "each act of cultural appropriation therefore constructs a simulacrum of a double negation, denying the validity of individual and original production, yet denying equally the relevance of the specific context and function of the work's own practice" (Graw, 2004, p. 34). It is clear that appropriation in the field of art is different from appropriation in the field of cultural studies. With creative license, appropriation in art is one of the ways to advance the field of art.

Appropriation in media and technology. According to Kellner (2011), media shapes our worldview and values. "Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture" (p. 7). Media teaches us, like public pedagogy, how to be who we are, how to see the world, and what norm is dominant in society today (Hladki, 1994). Kellner (2011) asserts,

cultural studies allows us to examine and critically scrutinize the whole range of culture without prior prejudices toward one or another sort of cultural text, institution, or practice. It also opens the way toward more differentiated political, rather than aesthetic valuations of cultural artifacts in which one attempts to distinguish critical and oppositional from conformist and conservative moments in a given cultural artifact. (p. 8)

Kellner (2011) also points out that we can use semiotic analysis to study culture phenomena formed by the media to reveal "how the codes and forms of particular genres construct certain meanings" (p. 10). Cultural symbols contain specific ideologies; therefore, when appropriating cultural symbols, the meaning is changed, lost, or distorted. Achen and Openjuru (2012) showed an interesting phenomenon in that when Ugandan translators translate Hollywood films from English, they are not translating word-by-word, but are re-contextualising the movies into a culturally relevant dialogue to engage their local audience. They are "appropriating the global into the local, a process that we can call the glocalisation of the commodity" (Achen & Openjuru, 2012, p. 365). Because of two-way communication between the prosumers, the grassroot content creators, and the cultural object they created, all meanings of cultural symbols that do not belong to the prosumers are, according to social media designer Chan, "accompanied by ambiguity of intent and motive" (as cited in Manovich, 2009, p. 327).

Appropriation in technology has a very different connotation. There are two aspects of appropriation in technology: "unanticipated use" and "customization" (Lindtner, Anderson, & Dourish, 2012, p. 77). For Flint and Turner (2016), "The appropriation of digital artifacts involves their use, which has changed, evolved or developed beyond their original design" (p. 41). Salovaara (2008) argues that appropriation can be seen as interpretation or reinterpretation in which users see new opportunities with the artifacts. Similar to "mod," the previously developed program code can be used for creating new objects or behaviors (Flint & Turner, 2016). Lindtner et al. (2012) state that "appropriation may lie in how technology is framed and articulated, that is, transformed not as a technical artifact but as a cultural object" (p. 78). Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009) celebrate appropriation in technology and media education in that appropriation is "the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content" (p. 32). According to Jenkins et al. (2009), "For beginning creators, appropriation provides a scaffolding, allowing them to focus on some dimensions of cultural production and rely on the existing materials to sustain others" (p. 33).

From the game design perspective, Vasalou et al. (2014) state, "Cultural appropriation occurs when game designers decontextualize cultural history, expressions or artifacts that belong to a culture that is not their own, in turn recontextualizing them into game structures" (p. 267). They suggest that it is important for game designers to be aware of which culture they choose to represent, in what contexts, and what kind of impact it might bring to the gamers. Vasalou et al. (2014) are also aware that cultural appropriation in games is not only formed

by the designer, but is also conceptualized by the player. Cultural appropriation is unavoidable in the context of ethnocomputing in that "cultural appropriation can extend designers' ethical considerations beyond members of the originating culture, to include end users" (p. 275).

Appropriation in the field of cultural studies. Cultural appropriation, similar to technology appropriation, refers to the ways people adapt and make it their own (Cuthbert, 1998; Heyd, 2003; Hladki, 1994; Lindtner et al., 2012). Rogers (2006) categorizes cultural appropriation into four categories: culture exchange, culture dominance, culture exploitation, and transculturation. "In every cultural appropriation there are those who act and those who are acted upon, and for those whose memories and cultural identities are manipulated by aesthetic, academic, economic, or political appropriations, the consequences can be disquieting or painful" (Nelson, 2003, p. 172). Young and Haley (2009) also point out that appropriation can be offensive and harmful. Hladki (1994) asserts that culture appropriation is "pastiche, pirating, and pilfering" (p. 97). According to Hart (1997),

> The debate over cultural appropriation is about whether speaking for others or representing them in fictional as well as legal, social, artistic, and political work is appropriate or proper, especially when individuals or groups with more social, economic, and political power perform this role for others without invitation. (p. 137)

In short, when a culture represents another culture, stereotypes easily occur (Said, 1985), especially for those belonging to minority cultures (Kulchyski, 1997; Young & Haley, 2009).

Scholars recognize that cultural appropriation is an inevitable process (Heyd, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2009; Johnson, 2001; Rogers, 2006). Cultural appropriation is not always about purely representing another culture, but it is tangled with political, economic, globalized, and cultural hegemony (Cuthbert, 1998; Hladki, 1994; Hook, 2006; Kulchyski, 1997; Salazar, 2012).

Research Method

Based on my prior work on the Third Culture (Han, 2010, 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2017), most of the findings indicate that due to limitations in the virtual world, it is important to be open-minded in our judgement of the virtual objects built by virtual world residents (Han, 2017). In my early research, I interviewed a Korean participant who claimed that she was not comfortable with how non-Korean virtual world residents represent Korea (Young & Haley, 2009). She proudly showed me a Korean town in SL by Koreans. I also remember that one Aboriginal participant told me it was hurtful when she saw misinterpretation of her culture in the virtual world, so she tried to build her own cultural representation in SL. After several other similar personal experiences, I started to wonder if I should remain open-minded and generous about cultural appropriation in virtual worlds.

I carried my question–if I should remain open-minded and generous about cultural appropriation in virtual worlds–to a SL Facebook group "Formosa Club in Second Life,"[1] where most of the SL residents are Taiwanese and use Mandarin Chinese to communicate. I posted my question in the group in Mandarin Chinese and asked if anyone would be interested in chatting with me regarding my question. Soon after, Freyja (SL name) replied and expressed her interests. I was very excited to receive Freyja's reply as I had seen her posts on the Facebook group regarding how to take a professional photograph in SL. She spent time finding suitable props and locations, adjusting the environmental settings, and selecting the best camera angle just to shoot photos in SL. The amount of time she spent taking one photo in SL was no less than that of a real life photographer.

In real life, Freyja lived in Beijing for ten years. Her career was in pharmaceuticals, but she had transferred to a biotechnology-related field. She is interested in international relations regarding politics and economics. She stated that her personality in SL is closer to her real self.

We started our non-structured, conversational interview (Hoepfl, 1997) in SL right away and had conversation every day for three to four hours, five days a week. It became more than a month-long unstructured interview. Besides discussing in SL, Freyja also sent me several text documents on Facebook or in SL concerning the topic of

1 https://www.facebook.com/groups/FormosaClub.SL/

cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. We also discussed many SL snapshots shown on Flicker.[2] All of our conversations were typed in Chinese traditional characters.

Semiotics as Research Methodology for Data Analysis

Virtual worlds are images constructed through a sign system (Chandler, 2004). To decode the sign system and the interview data, I chose to use Barthes' (1977) semiotic approach because it examines not only texts or signs, but also the cultural system that creates them. Barthes approaches texts systematically and scientifically (Fuery & Fuery, 2003). For Barthes, texts are not meaningful on their own. Barthes' original semiotic concepts were "essentially canonized and have become part of the movement to analyse many different forms of visual expression" (Burnett, 2002, p. 150). The terms Barthes uses—denotation, connotation, metaphor, and myth—have been broadly applied to the fields of semiotics, visual culture, and visual communication. In this paper, I specifically chose to use denotation and connotation as the means to analyze my interview text and visual data because these two coding systems are able to draw the cultural meanings embedded in the texts beyond the surface level of understanding.

Denotation is the "direct, specific, or literal meaning we get from a sign" (Moriarty, 2005, p. 231). In short, it describes the literal meaning of a sign. Connotations are meanings that are "evoked by the object, that is, what it symbolizes on a subjective level" (p. 231). In other words, connotation refers to the social-cultural and personal affiliation of a sign. As Frascara (2004) states, "The connoted message is more culture-dependent, and it is built as a combination of the designer's concept and the target public's experience" (p. 69). The connotation of signs helps us to better understand the meaning behind the images. Most of the time we notice the denotation of an image, but we may never consciously notice the connotation of the image. If we do not think about the connotation of an image, we will not understand the hidden meaning of the image (Han, 2011a). "Connotation produces the illusion of denotation, the illusion of the medium as transparent and of the signifier and the signified as being identical" (Chandler, 2004, p. 141). My research applied Barthes' semiotic theories to visual culture in the virtual world. Examining the visual culture environment from a semiotic point of view helps people form a deeper understanding of the culture they inhabit.

2 https://www.flickr.com/search/groups/?text=second%20life

Findings

I analyzed the extensive data, including conversational interview transcripts, notes and images sent from Freyja, and Flicker images we browsed and discussed. I found there were three threads in our conversation: 1) cultural appropriation in virtual worlds, 2) caring about cultural appropriation, and 3) solutions to cultural appropriation in virtual worlds. Below, I will start with a virtual world photo comparison and unpack the three aforementioned threads in detail.

Figure 1. Look #902 Exotic Duality by Kamila Stoanes[3]

3 https://www.flickr.com/photos/kamilastoanes/28467517983

Figure 2. Blade Dance ～刀舞・瑽光～ by Freyja Nishi[4]

We examined and compared several Flicker images, trying to figure out what might be the reasons for the cultural appropriation. The very first finding was the lack or misuse of culturally relevant details (Heyd, 2003). Take Figure 1 as an example. It is a snapshot taken by a non-Asian artist using Asian cultural elements as part of the image. The title of the image, "Exotic Duality," shows that the artist was trying to demonstrate or represent an exotic culture.

The model in Figure 1 has stereotypical Asian eyes with accessories that imply Chinese culture. It was a bizarre image to Freyja and me. First of all, not all Asians have "Asian eyes." However, in virtual worlds, when non-Asians want to present the Asian culture, avatars must use Asian eyes. I believe the connotation of Asian eyes in Western culture represents Asian people. However, the connotation of Asian eyes in China or Taiwan represents a rarely seen classic type of beauty because not all Asians have Asian eyes. Secondly, Tai Chi is not a decorative icon. I believe the connotation of the Tai Chi icon that the artist had in mind was to make a connection to Asian culture. However, in China or Taiwan, it is a symbol that connotes a religion or a way of thinking. Finally, the tassel necklace is an interesting

4 https://www.flickr.com/photos/117266973@N02/17019064386/in/dateposted/

creation. The red tassel necklace echoes the relevance to the red hair tassel, the Asian style. However, by no means is it a traditional Chinese style necklace. The problematic part of the image is not only that the artist misused Asian cultural elements or misrepresented the Asian culture, but also how the artist portrayed the Asian culture. The denotation of this image is that the Asian female avatar is positioned in a garden with a sexualized pose and lingerie. A masculine Western lounge chair is right behind her. The connection between the chair and the female is a chain on the broken lanterns.

Barthes' idea of connotation of these details creates a different interpretation depending on who is viewing the artwork. When I see this image, the masculine Western chair represents the power of the Westerner, and the Asian female avatar is an object or a slave that is controlled by the Westerner. The chain connotes the control and power relation between the Asian female avatar and the Westerner. While the chain is broken, the female avatar is still bending down on her knees; the connotation to me is that this Asian avatar is waiting for someone to take her. The problem with this image is not only about culture but also about the relational power imbalance between male and female.

Figure 2 was created by Freyja. Compared to Figure 1, the detailed patterns on the outfit, accessories, and arms are properly used. The background location is also well selected. Reflecting on previous research participants' statements, the limitation of virtual world creation was the reason that caused culture appropriation (Han, 2017), yet this statement does not stand. Freyja is able to find and use a culturally appropriate scene, object, and avatar without a problem. Therefore, why does cultural appropriation or misunderstanding happen in virtual worlds?

Cultural Appropriation in Virtual Worlds

From this research, I found there are three reasons that cause cultural appropriation in virtual worlds: 1) language barriers, 2) lack of cultural context, and 3) people prefer exotic imagery rather than authentic cultural representation.

According to Freyja, "'大部分的問題出在翻譯和解讀上 [most problems occur at the translation and interpretation]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 23, 2016). I abbreviated that idea to the language barrier; from our conversation, it is mostly about unequal accessibility to information. That is to say, when non-Asian virtual

world residents create Asian products, they have fewer resources that can be translated into English or other Western languages. This issue can be divided into several subcategories:

A. People do not have enough access to the language that they are creating for; therefore, the culture they are representing might be misunderstood.
B. Personal translation / interpretation. A virtual world resident might rely upon a resident from the cultural or language system. However, the translation and interpretation might contain personal bias (Achen & Openjuru, 2012). As Freyja stated, "對文字的解讀能力 [people's ability differ on how to interpret words]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 18, 2016).
C. Translation / interpretation between languages. A virtual world resident might be able to translate text from a translator. However, "文字查詢資料產生的偏差 [during the translation, the cultural context might not be able to be translated or understood]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 18, 2016).
D. "文字影像互相轉換的問題 [Translation / interpretation from language to image]" (Freyja, personal communication, September15, 2016): when a virtual world resident translates a description into a tangible object, the connotation might not be able to be translated in a meaningful way.
E. Translation / interpretation from image to meaning. Most of the virtual world creators do research before they create (Han, 2017). However, when they research the images they are recreating, they are unable to understand the context or meaning of the image (such as the Tai Chi symbol in Figure 1). Therefore, when they put multiple cultural items together, misunderstanding occurs (Potts, 2003).
F. "2D和3D之間的轉換 [Translation / interpretation from 2D image to 3D object]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 27, 2016): Virtual worlds are three-dimensional environments. In a virtual world, people can use avatars to walk in a building or view a sculpture from all angles. In 2017, virtual world artist Bryn Oh 3D printed her virtual artwork into real-life physical artwork. Virtual worlds might look 2D when seen from snapshots; however, when visiting a virtual world, it is a world with XYZ axes that people can interact with from 360 degrees (Han, 2010). Therefore, when translating a 2D image into 3D object, the creators are not able to make sense of how the 3D object might be used or presented in the real life. Therefore, there are more chances of misunderstanding.

"缺乏文化理解 [Lack of cultural context]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 13, 2016) occurs mostly because people prefer to stay in their original culture circle "舒適圈 [comfort zone]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 18, 2016) with their own language speakers. These cultural groups are similar to the real world geographic boundaries. These boundaries, in both virtual and real worlds, build walls between knowing other cultures and being known by other cultures (Achen & Openjuru, 2012). Within the same culture, when virtual world residents see cultural imagery they are not familiar with, they do not ask further. They do not have the cultural context of other cultures to be able to ask more or critical questions (Moriarty, 2005). Because they do not understand the cultural context of the image, when they can find an item to be purchased, they may not consider whether it is appreciation or appropriation. Therefore, when the buyers are not critical, the sellers or creators are given permission to create objects without knowing cultural details.

Freyja noted that virtual world residents prefer exotic images rather than authentic cultural representation. She states, "作品某種程度上就是離開現實… 觀眾才會有欲望去看 [distance from reality brings curiosity]" (Freyja, personal communication, August 27, 2016). From the data, the distance could be the difference between cultural groups and/or cultural imagery (Rogers, 2006). When there is distance from other cultural groups, imagination fills the gap between the cultural object and the reality. Virtual world residents do not really seem to know all the details about the cultural group to awaken their imagination, but they prefer to enjoy the unknown. The distance to cultural imagery includes, but is not limited to, appropriated works, imaginary works, and creative artwork. Many virtual world creators argue that requiring cultural authenticity limits the creativity of virtual artwork (Han, 2017). Therefore, this statement leads us to the next thread: why should we care?

Caring about Cultural Appropriation

In the real world, we critically examine visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004); in an immersive virtual world, we are also asked to use the same critical eye to look into the virtual world creation because every artifact is created by a real human with various reasons for creating it. From the data, I found there are several questions we ask about real world visual culture that are also applicable to virtual world visual cultures, especially to the culture-related visual

creations. The questions are: Who benefits from the visual cultural creations? Who are the creators? For what purpose did they create the cultural object? What might the creators think about the culture that they are appropriating? What messages are they delivering? Who are the audiences? And, what messages are audiences receiving from the cultural object?

Culture sells (Ninetto, 1998), and in the real world, tourism sells cultures (Salazar, 2012). Human beings are attracted to different cultures and cultural products. Virtual world cultural creations are much easier to make because of fewer real world physical limitations, and they are rarely criticized because people prefer to stay with their cultural group (Wang, 2001). Virtual world creators pay less attention to cultural appropriation; however, the influence they bring to the world is no less than real world cultural appropriation (Said, 1985).

Solutions to Cultural Appropriation in Virtual Worlds

Freyja strongly suggests that cultural exchange and mutual respect (推動文化交流和相互尊重) (Freyja, personal communication, September 15, 2016) are the solutions to cultural appropriation in virtual worlds. Cultural exchange introduces our own cultures to others in which we are interested. In an equal platform, virtual world residents celebrate their own culture and introduce their own culture to others. With language support and cross-cultural conversation, cultural contexts of 3D virtual objects are introduced and explained to people who are not familiar with the culture.

Mutual respect asks us to care for and learn about other cultures within correct cultural contexts. Each cultural symbol contains a specific meaning: stopping at tolerance (Han, 2017) might not be enough, whereas learning to mutually respect other cultures might help to create a world without stereotypical impressions. Limitations on getting to know cultural context are recognized; however, cultural objects are not to be made fun of, joked about, or treated with contempt (Heyd, 2003). Virtual world creators would do well to learn how to be consciously aware of the power of their creation and avoid cultural appropriation (Graw, 2004).

Conclusion

Culture is to be lived and to be learned. The connotation of cultural symbols is negotiated and learned within the culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004). When we are part of the dominant culture using another's cultural objects, we may not know the context of that object, which may lead to cultural appropriation. The findings of my previous research have shown that it is important to be open-minded in the virtual world (Han, 2017). However, it is also important to be respectful of other cultural imagery while creating virtual objects (Rogers, 2006). Cultural imagery carries cultural meanings (Nelson, 2003). Virtual imagery rapidly delivers meanings, exaggerates, and creates a strong impact. Massive visual impacts affect viewers who do not have time to process each image (Duncum, 1997). Lack of critical thinking when receiving the imagery is an accomplice to cultural appropriation. Deviation between the original cultural artifact created by the culture owner and the cultural artifact that is perceived by viewers are linked through culturally based connotations (Evans, 2009). Looking critically at virtual objects without a cultural context is not an easy task. I believe we need to develop visual literacy to help virtual world residents learn how to read, see, and decode virtual imagery (Duncum, 2002). Visual literacy will also help virtual world creators be aware of the cultural details they create.

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