

Enduring Idea: Utopia

Integrated Discipline: Social Studies

Unit Title: Virtual/Perfect: Utopia, Virtual Spaces, and Avatars

Unit Designer: Courtnie Wolfgang

Unit Description: It has long been the trope of visual artists to envision near-perfect communities or environments somehow different from the ones that we actually inhabit, whether an encounter with nature in a sterile office space in Skoglund's *A Breeze at Work* or Bellows' idyllic pastoral landscape. In this unit, learners will discuss artists' renderings of utopia, making comparisons between the traditions of creating and visually representing utopia and desires to occupy virtual spaces and avatar creation in the 21st century.

Images:



1994.20 Sandy Skoglund, *A Breeze at Work* (1987)



1997.10 Albert Fitch Bellows, *The River Bank* (1861)

Key Concept: Utopia, virtual spaces, and avatars

Essential Question: What is the relationship between a desire to inhabit virtual spaces or create avatars and the creation/representation of utopian societies?

CCSS Art: MA6, 7, 8-4.2 Analyze and describe the relationship between the media arts and other arts disciplines and other content areas.

MA6, 7, 8-6.1 Analyze and describe human, cultural, and societal issues related to the media arts and the use of technology.

MA6, 7, 8-6.2 Practice legal and ethical behavior in the media arts and the use of technology.

MA6, 7, 8-5.3 Analyze and describe characteristics of the media arts that exist across time and among diverse cultural and ethnic groups.

Integrated CCSS: Civic Ideals and Practices

Learning Outcomes: Learners will develop working definitions of utopia based on prior knowledge, visual and literary accounts of utopia, and exploratory discussions.

Learners will investigate their own desires to inhabit and perform in virtual spaces and the creation of avatars through social media, gaming, etc.

Learners will use traditional and digital media to create collaborative works of art that investigate notions of utopia in the 21st century.

Motivator: Day 1- **Avatar creation**

Learners create an avatar. Use any number of free and available avatar making apps for tablets, iPads, Smartphones, or computers. e.g Gatsby Avatar Creator
<http://apps.warnerbros.com/greatgatsby/avatarcreator/us/>

Day Breakdown: Day 1- **Discussion**

What is a utopia? Ask learners to describe their understandings of utopia. View the art works by Skoglund and Bellows. Learners may make comparisons between the two and their working definitions of utopia.

Virtual utopia:

YouTube clip "Minecraft Most Amazing Creations Ever"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr1C71FwOCE>

And/or "Second Life 10 Most Photogenic Places"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slx1RuQQ9h4>

Ask learners to discuss practices of building and inhabiting virtual spaces. Why is it so popular? What is the desire to occupy the virtual?

Avatars and virtual spaces:

Art 21- Cao Fei: Avatars

<http://video.pbs.org/video/1569331856/>

Why do people create avatars? Who has an avatar? What does it/he/she look like? What traits do we include/exclude in the creation of avatars?

Day 2- **Utopia making**

Learners begin to "compose utopia." If technology is available, a collective online environment might be created. Smeet offers a free and age-appropriate virtual world for younger learners (adolescents).

<http://en.smeet.com/virtualworld>

(Modifications to the unit can be made for more traditional methods of art making: learners may collaborate on a design for large-scale painting or mixed media collage.)

Establishing criteria for collective utopia

Learners work in small groups creating lists of utopian characteristics for their new world. Have learners consider

things like location, climate, geographic features, landmarks, etc. Learners should make a case for their decisions and, when necessary, make compromises within their small groups until agreements can be made.

Each small group designates a spokesperson and delivers findings to the larger group. Proceed with negotiations until learners arrive at a consensus. Instructor's role should be to observe and ask questions, but not to intervene in decision-making.

Days 3-5 **Building the virtual environment**

Learners begin to build the virtual world and their avatars to reside in the virtual world. Tasks may be divided, but the process is collaborative. What is being created? How are learners engaging/interacting in the virtual environment and with each other? What are conflicts and how are they being resolved?

Extension:

Days 6-8 **Capturing a perfect/virtual**

Learners will locate themselves within the collaborative "utopia" and create a screen capture. Working from the screen captures, learners can use drawing and painting media to produce an idyllic landscape or portrait within the landscape of their virtual utopia.

Materials: iPads, tablets, computers, or Smartphones
Paper
Drawing media
Paint (acrylic, tempera, and/or watercolor)

Resources: Other free, accessible virtual worlds-
Twinity
http://www.twinity.com/en/virtual_worlds/virtual-world
PrimaryGames
<http://www.primarygames.com/arcade/virtualworlds.php>

Article: 13 Tips for Virtual World Teaching
<http://campustechnology.com/articles/2008/01/13-tips-for-virtual-world-teaching.aspx>

Clip: Virtual Worlds for Teaching and Learning
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVrQLmrzgFA>

Article: Get a Life- Students Collaborate in Simulated Roles

<http://www.edutopia.org/second-life-virtual-reality-collaboration>

Assessment: Formative-
Learners keep diaries throughout the process. Each day instructor should provide learners with a prompt for responding.

Summative-
Learners are each responsible for the creation of an avatar and the shared responsibility of the creation of the virtual community. The nature of this unit is collaborative, so it is strongly suggested that in addition to any analytic or holistic summative assessment created by the instructor, the learners are also given the opportunity to assess their own process and each other. Areas to consider for peer assessment: **Participation, Leadership, Feedback, Listening, and Cooperation.**