Re-Visitation of "The Epic of Sunjata": Using Virtual Reality (VR) as a Method of Instruction

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Abstract

This paper focuses on students learning literature in the classroom, presenting it as a challenging "out of culture experience". The expanded world history curriculum now encompasses a global perspective, moving beyond a European focus. To engage with topics beyond Europe, students must cultivate approaches that extend beyond mere memorization of dates and locations. One approach to adopt is the use of VR to expose students to literature from outside Africa and Europe (VR). A narrative such as "The Epic of Sunjata" may teach valuable lessons, as it will pique students' curiosity about subjects outside Africa and Europe.

Keywords: The Epic of Sunjata, Virtual Reality, Method of Instruction, Mali-West Africa, Socio-Cultural Trends

Introduction

"The Epic of Sunjata" originated from the Empire of Mali, which is one of the greatest northwestern African empires that took over the grasslands for centuries. The story of "Sunjata" is handed down from generations orally. "The Epic of Sunjata" is the story of "Sunjata Keita" and the building of the Empire of Mali in the thirteenth century. The story gained such widespread popularity that it became firmly embraced by the people of Mali. Interestingly, scholars, researchers, and tourists have written about the

story. The Epic of Sunjata is told by a particular cast of people that are descendants of Sunjata Keita's ethnic group. The "Griots" males and /or "Griottes" females sing or tell the story at every ceremony they attend. "The Epic of Sunjata" needs to be virtualized in order for students and faculty to learn the culture of Mali and non-Europeans' stories. The objective of this paper is to illustrate the use of Virtual Reality (VR) as a teaching method for world literature instructors and students, using videotaping as an example.

Virtual Reality (VR) Recording Research in Mali-West Africa: "The Epic of Sunjata."

During the 2019 American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Convention in Washington, D.C., "Innovation of New Technologies for Implementing Languages and Literature in the Classroom" emerged as a prominent resource, showcasing key advancements in educational technology. The project involves recording Virtual Reality (VR) videos with subtitles, showcasing fieldwork outcomes that encompass "Oral Traditions" epics originating from Mali, West Africa. These epics, attributed to "Griots or Troubadours," are translated from the local dialect, "Bambara," into English/French. As the first epic print to capture the rich oral traditions of the "Bambara" ethnic group in Mali-West Africa, a video Virtual Reality (VR) recording is intended as a scholarly reference for African Studies, ethnicity, folk literature, religion, and colonialism. This will contribute to the ongoing debate on the identity of Blacks in Western Society and their African Heritage.

Jansen Jan (1996) in "The Sunjata Epic: The Ultimate Version" describes how, in recent decades, the Sunjata epic has garnered significant attention as a masterpiece of African oral literature. It is frequently included in undergraduate courses in literature or world history at American universities. The "Sunjata Epic is regarded as a major part of the historical heritage of the famous medieval Mali Empire in the fourteenth century. Radianti, Jaziar and Maajchrzak, Tim and Fromm, Jennifer and Wohlgenannt, and Isabell (2020) conducted a systematic review on immersive virtual reality applications for higher education in the field of Computer and Education.

The exploration of virtual reality (VR) benefits and applications in various scenarios is evident through the inclusion of design elements, lessons learned, and research agenda. Virtual Reality (VR) holds significant potential, and its application in education has garnered substantial research interest in recent times. For example, the incorporation of learning theories

from world literature is not currently taken into account in the development of VR applications designed to support and guide learning outcomes. Virtual Reality (VR) is primarily focused on the usability of VR apps instead of learning outcomes, and immersive VR has mostly been a part of experimental and development work rather than being applied regularly in actual teaching. Nevertheless, VR seems to be a promising technology. Benjy, Marks, and Thomas (2021) in their study, "Adoption of Virtual Reality Technology in Higher Education: An Evaluation of Five Teaching Semesters in a Purpose-Designed Laboratory," assert that the utilization of Virtual Reality (VR) into higher education is in its early stages of adoption as a teaching platform. The technology can facilitate immersive learning in environments that are not physically accessible to students via 3D models and interactive 360º video. Today, adoption rates of VR technology for teaching have not been well described across higher education institutions. The development of these technologies are currently underway in this twenty-first century.

The primary focus of this paper is the application of VR in narrating the story by a renowned griot/storyteller of Mali. However, the specific emphasis is on utilizing VR in the storytelling of a well-known griot/storyteller from the "Epic of Sunjata." This narrative, never before brought to life in virtual form, presents an opportunity to engage students in classrooms.

The first part of the video recasts the Empire of Mali, which lasted in various forms from the 13th to the 17th century and plays a unique role in regional oral tradition. Mali is the center to which many surrounding traditions of origin attach themselves. The "Sunjata Keita's Epic" reveals the myth of the foundation or genesis of the ancient Kingdom of Mali as well as its pre-colonial, socio-political, and cultural trends. This ancient realm, currently designated as one of Mali's administrative divisions, predates the era of French colonialism and endured through its early stages. The Bambara/Mandingo group predominantly resides there. Renowned for its rich oral traditions, steeped in distinctive socio-cultural trends, the group is particularly celebrated for the transmission of its history and legends through storytellers, including "griots, troubadours, and traditional healers." Prominent French missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and contemporary African and Europeans Scholars have written about this specific ethnic group. Monteil Charles (1977) authored "Les Bambara du Segou et du Kaarta", while Bird Charles (1977) provided a critical review of "Sunjata: Three Mandinka Versions" in Research in

African Literatures (1987). Additionally, Bird Charles, Fa-Digi Sissoko, and John William Johnson (1988) contributed to "The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition" serving as a significant scholarly reference (1992). Notably, David Conrad's latest work, "Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande People" in paperback (2004) is an essential addition to this scholarly discourse. This edition stands well on its own, yet a significant source of enjoyment lies in the fresh background stories for characters connected to "Sunjata," particularly the pivotal role played by women. Presenting the narrative of "Sunjata" through the immersive experience of Virtual Reality (VR), as conveyed by the griot/storyteller, would be an exceptional and enriching experience for both the students and faculty.

The "Visitation of 'The Epic of Sunjata'" will be presented as a Virtual Reality (VR) video. This innovative project aims to facilitate experimental learning for students, enabling them to engage with the content from their classrooms or homes. The VR recordings, captured in Mali, West Africa, will encompass various aspects, including: a.) Immersion in the culture and language of Bambara. b.) Exposure to the language through video in either Bambara or French. c.) Presentation of "The Epic of Sunjata" within its culturally authentic setting. d.) The recorded video narrative of "The Epic of Sunjata" will also serve as a valuable resource for faculty and students worldwide, contributing to the exploration of languages and literature within higher education institutions.

The second phase of Virtual Reality (VR) aims to challenge conventional perceptions of "oral" texts as purely social documents by emphasizing their literary, aesthetic, and historical significance. This phase seeks to advance scholarly research on a specific ethnic group by extending beyond the identification of ethnic characteristics. This research will be limited to one (1) griot/storyteller data collection. All the stories of "The Epic of Sunjata" told by other griots/storytellers are similar stories. It will be interesting to examine the impacts of Islam, Christianity, and French colonialism on the culture and the project of modernity.

Analysis of "The Epic of Sunjata"

Understanding the narrative of "The Epic of Sunjata" is pivotal to fully grasp its potential as a teaching tool. The story of Sunjata Keita, the hero who overcomes adversity to establish the Mali Empire in the 13th century, is compelling and culturally enlightening (Stephen Belcher, 1999). The plot unfolds a rich tapestry of characters that represent the cultural and societal norms of the era. The story not only portrays leadership but also symbolizes the human values of courage, tenacity, and resilience. The

characters range from the cunning and strong Sunjata, the sympathetic figure of Sogolon, the prophesied buffalo woman, and the usurping sorcerer king, Sumanguru. Their interactions and experiences provided an intricate view of the sociopolitical and cultural environment of West Africa in the 13th century.

Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative research with a narrative research design, which is suitable for telling stories in detail. The researcher converts the narratives about the experiences of individuals, describes their life experiences, discusses the meaning of the experience with the individual, and offers interpretation using Virtual Reality (VR) technology. Virtual Reality (VR) video recording will serve as a scholarly reference for African Studies, encompassing history, ethnicity, folk literature, religion, and colonialism. This contribution aims to enrich the discourse on the identity of Blacks in Western society and their connection to African heritage. Furthermore, this research compiles different versions of "The Epic of Sunjata" recounted by two (2) or three (3) distinct griots/storytellers within the Bambara and/or Mandingo communities of Mali. The chosen version of "The Epic of Sunjata" will be transformed into virtual reality video recordings. The outcomes of this study will contribute to the Humanities, including Literature, Languages and Cultures, History, and Political Sciences, thus benefiting Delaware State University (DSU) and global Language and Literatures Departments in Higher Education.

Virtual Reality (VR) is regarded as a window for the location of the vestiges of African oral traditions among the griots/storytellers (Bambara and/or Mandinka language). Given that Mali is predominantly Bambara, a griot/storyteller, renowned for narrating "The Epic of Sunjata," would be chosen. Moreover, a great interest has been developed in the relationship between different contemporary versions of "The Epic of Sunjata." For example, findings reveal that versions are similar, while narrative patterns between "griots/storytellers" differs. In Virtual Reality (VR), the chosen griot or storyteller introduces the narrative by providing a brief biography, including details about ethnic background. This is followed by the standard format presentation of such texts where an edited transcription is on the bottom of the screen, and the corresponding translation is done orally in English/French.

Classroom Experimentation

Three different classes will be utilized to carry out an experimental study so as to determine the effectiveness of the VR tool in facilitating an

understanding of world literature. In each class, students will be exposed to the VR module of "The Epic of Sunjata," and their interaction, comprehension, and interest level will be recorded. The evaluation of these variables will be performed through a variety of methods, including direct observation, open discussions, and questionnaires (Hawkins, 2020).

Classroom Dynamics Analysis

The implementation of VR technology is expected to bring about significant changes in the dynamics of the classroom. The study observes these changes in terms of student interaction, engagement, interest levels, and the overall classroom environment. The goal is to understand how VR can influence classroom dynamics, promote active engagement with subject matter, and enhance interpersonal communication among students (Merchant et al., 2014).

Dissection and Results

Following the completion of the classroom experimentation, the obtained results will be dissected meticulously. The primary focus is on student engagement, comprehension of the story, and the impact of VR within classroom dynamics. The challenges encountered during the experiment will be highlighted, including insights derived from the process. Furthermore, quantitative data from the questionnaires will be used to reinforce the findings.

The Role of Cultural Sensitivity

In the discussion of education, cultural sensitivity is an indispensable factor. It establishes an understanding of cultural diversity and underlines the need for inclusiveness in learning environments (Gay, 2002). By enabling students to virtually experience "The Epic of Sunjata," they get to explore and appreciate a culture different from their own. The immersive experience of the VR module fosters a greater understanding of the culture of Mali and cultivates a higher degree of cultural sensitivity. The study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of cultural sensitivity in education and explores how technology can enhance this aspect.

Summary - "The Epic of "Sunjata"—Major Characters

"Sunjata" is the son of the King of the Mandinka ethnic group, "Maghan Kung Fata", and one of his wives, "Sogolon", is a pagan with occult knowledge. "Sunjata's chief rival is an older half-brother named "Dankara Tuma". Dankara Tuma's mother puts a curse on "Sunjata", compelling him to ascend with a staff crafted from a sacred tree. Upon the death of the King, Dankara Tuma rules for a brief time before the sorcerer

"Sumanguru" usurps the throne of Mali. "Sumanguru" is warned by soothsayers that "Sunjata" is destined to become King. To prevent this, "Sumanguru" summons "Sogolon" and earns the admiration of various monarchs who will later come to his aid. The sister of "Sunjata" seduces "Sumanguru in order to trick him into revealing the secret of his sorcery. She passes the knowledge on to "Sunjata", who promptly uses it to destroy "Sumanguru". Before then, "Sumanguru" saves himself by changing into a bird (or a stone). Unsatisfied with the size of his Kingdom, "Sunjata" proceeds to expand it at the cost of his neighbor's lands.

Conclusion

"Sunjata" is a captivating narrative of daring exploits and acts of bravery that champions the Mande value of courage in the face of opposition. Some scholars have also noted an emphasis on female characters and their essential roles in the family. Other scholars have asserted that the "Epic of Sunjata" played an important role in bringing together diverse groups of people into one nation by giving them a common story. The Virtual Reality (VR) in this paper mainly focused on the characteristics of its accounts and its transmission through generations. Classical and Medieval Literatures writers, such as David Conrad (2004), Gordon Innes (2000), Stephen Belcher (1999), Isidore Okpewho (1999), and Jan Jansen (2001) have done extensive work on "The Epic of Sunjata". Nevertheless, this research paper aims to contribute to the creation of a significant collection of oral traditions within Classical Medieval Literature in the 21st century, employing Virtual Reality (VR) as a tool for collecting stories. This in turn will benefit the Department of Languages and Literatures at Delaware State University, Dover, Delaware, where American literature, African American literature, World literature, and the field of Literature in general are currently taught.

Plans For Data Collection
- Share the Virtual Reality (VR) research with colleagues.
- Share/publish the Virtual Reality (VR) experience of "The Epic of Sunjata" in Bamako, Mali.
- Train Delaware State University on the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in the classroom, which is the leading area of pedagogical technology development with great potential for digital, experiential learning.
- Provide Virtual Reality (VR) and video resources for application in General Education (World Literature Course on the "Epic of Sunjata").

- Provide digital experiential learning to students as they encounter "Epic of Sunjata" in their course of study.

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