

Nov 04, 2016 by [Joshua S. Fouts](#)

The “ROI” on Virtual Worlds, The Importance of Understanding Culture ^[1]

This article first appeared on the [MacArthur Foundation's Spotlight blog](#).

I spent the past week at the [Virtual Worlds Conference and Expo](#) in San Jose, California.

There were a number of interesting panels, but two themes caught my attention that I'd like to discuss here: 1) Concern for ROI or Return on Investment in Virtual Worlds; and 2) The Rise of China.

ROI

As interest in virtual worlds and the 3-D Immersive Web continues to peak, there has been much-ballyhooed media coverage about the flood of corporations rushing into the space; some who missed the boat during the dotcom boom of the 1990s and don't want to miss out on this. But the narrative has turned. Lately media coverage and pundits have turned to reporting on the subsequent disappointment of corporations who found that building an edifice did not necessarily mean that, if they built it, people would come.

It was with this in mind that I attended the [ROI panel](#). To my surprise, the line of questioning to the panelists was tantamount to asking how widgets should be managed in virtual spaces. I suppose this makes sense, since the title of the panel was “ROI.”

What intrigued me was that the audience seemed more interested in the result rather than in the process.

One of the panelists, [Rita J. King](#), who is collaborating with us on our grant from the MacArthur Foundation made an interesting observation. Shouldn't the focus and concern around ROI be on how to understand and cultivate vibrant communities? In the aforementioned project, [The Role of the Foundation in Virtual Worlds](#), which is funded by the MacArthur Foundation, our core tenet is to enter the space without ego. By that, I mean that we do not enter into virtual worlds or the 3-D Immersive Web with assumptions about what we already know, or what we hope to teach the people in these spaces. Instead, we enter ready to listen and learn. We have intentionally sought not to construct a new edifice in places like Second Life to which we would invite people (building it so they will come). Certainly we will build some places for gatherings, but the intent will not be to bring people to us, as much as it will be to go to the people where they spend their time.

Our work with Rita is to see how we can best understand the community before we engage them, to engage them on their own terms, and to utilize the newfound understanding of the culture to maximize understanding and cooperation, which we believe is one of the

cornerstones to understanding what the role of a foundation can be in these spaces.

We'll keep you posted as this progresses.

China and the Immersive Web

While one half of the crowd was focused on widgets the other half was in a feeding frenzy trying to get a few minutes with the various representatives from the Chinese virtual worlds constituency.

Mssrs. Xu Hui and Zafka Zhang of HiPiHi.com made a big impression. HiPiHi is an all Chinese-language virtual world created to provide an environment in which to learn about Chinese culture. Similar to Second Life, it is entirely user created. Dissimilar to Second Life, there are no English-language fonts. To visit HiPiHi is to visit the 3-D Immersive Web through the eyes of China. It is a world in which English is not the dominant language and the United States is not the dominant culture.

What can we learn from this?

As with the ROI reflection above, our hope is to engage the virtual world community of China as we are in the U.S. We will ask them in the same culturally-sensitive manner, "What can a foundation do in this space?" "What does it mean to do this in a language other than English?"

To be sure the MacArthur Foundation has a significant presence in China. But does it mean something different to have a presence in the 3-D Immersive Web of China? Or the Second Life of China? Some of the questions we hope to address include: How will the culture and politics of the evolving China manifest in these spaces? What kinds of things do people do in Hipihi? Do Chinese notions of "public space" differ from Western notions, are we seeing those difference play out in Hipihi, as opposed to SL? What are the idealized notions of community in Chinese life? Are they reflected in the space? What kinds of things does Hipihi allow people to do that they might not be able to do in physical space? (I don't necessarily mean politically, though that may or may not be a part of it). What are the emergent properties of the space, the things that are not designed it to, but that have come from the act of people participating?

In coming months we hope to do some community conversations in HiPiHi.

We hope you will join us in this adventure.
