

## Concluding/Reflection Document:

I wanted to revisit my thoughts and goals from my initial proposal to start this concluding/reflection document:

VTS Editor is a Virtual Reality (VR) Immersive Learning and Gamified Simulator ( <https://seriousfactory.com/en/authoring-software-vts-editor/> ). It is often used by employers, administrators, and by academic programs to provide realistic training where employees and students can “safely” make the difficult mistakes that come with learning, especially those that may involve issues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), before they enter the real situation. For example, through VTS Editor, a simulation can be designed where a medical student is able to encounter some of the key issues—from others and from themselves—that she or he would face when they are treating a population of people who may be experiencing temporary or long term homelessness.

VTS Editor is largely “plug and play.” In other words, the user (the one who constructs the scenario—**the role/skillset that I am looking to develop**—as well as the person who experiences the scenario) does not need to know computer code, etc. It is fairly user friendly and very dynamic and engaging as a platform and experience. **Nevertheless, it is still very intricate and challenging to tackle.**

The ability to create such experiences is powerful, real-world applicable, the use of technology beyond simply using “the next new thing,” able to create key experiences of “walking in the shoes of another,” and transformative for all involved (as can be seen in the previously mentioned example of the medical student). For example, I hope to be able to learn and practice much more with VTS Editor to be able to create short scenarios (**and potentially have students do the same [emphasis added from the original]**) where they can “safely” tackle sensitive, challenging, societal-scale as well as individual-scale, and historic as well as enduring [**and current**] issues (from race to economics) in my political science courses for the Honors Program.

I do **not** intend to be use VTS Editor as a complete substitute for or to allow students to avoid engaging in-person with the course material and with each other in rigors and respectful ways around difficult ideas. Some of the key parts of my courses, especially because they are composed of 25 students or less, are class discussion and presentations. One example of a presentation (**it is more of a role play/simulation [emphasis added from the original]**) that is carried out by students in-person (**and has also been done on Zoom [emphasis added from the original]**) in some of my courses is the following (excerpt):

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Rev. Dr. King or Malcolm X wakes up today and gives a speech or talks about a key issue for our time.

(they are middle-aged; still intellectually and physically sharp; **they are fully aware of the advances—and difficulties—of the present-day world**)

First, select **one** of these individuals: \_\_\_\_\_

Second, select the issue:

**These are just examples:**

Police brutality; climate change; economic inequality; racism and white supremacy; voting; funding and access to public education; political and social milestones or “first;”).

Third, select the venue/format and audience:

**These are just examples:**

National primetime event on television where he addresses the nation; sports arena like a concert; a town hall like presidential candidates do in public spaces or at a university with a moderator; television conversation/interview—e.g., like Oprah interview Lance Armstrong after he admitted to doping in cycling.

Fourth, **without explicitly saying it** to your audience and **only using the “form/style and content”** of your speech (*how you speak, your analysis and proposed solution to the problem, etc.*), deliver a speech or interview as the “younger/early” or “older/later” version of Malcolm or Martin.\*

\*By the end of your speech/interview, your audience should clearly be able to walk away and identify which “version” of Malcolm or Martin they just heard.

**Younger/early or older/later:**

What I mean here is that we have read/seen speeches, videos, etc. from Malcolm and Martin in the early/“younger” days of their public political lives and political thought as well as in their later/“older” days of their public political lives and political thought

I could still continue with similar role-play/simulations, but a VTS Editor project may compel more direct “confrontation” of the people and issues (e.g., the issue of the resurgence of white supremacy among the American public and elected officials in Washington, D.C.). The ability to

Please do not use this document, my VTS editor/simulation, or any related materials for this project in print, email, video, etc. without the written permission of the author. channel dialogue through a virtual space and characters (but dialogue and material **rooted in course material, research, and outside examples**), may provide a “safer” space to make mistakes, take risks, and to “step:”

-step outside oneself (taking on a role/person you may **not** agree with; being able to present this role in-person through an “avatar”)

-step into the shoes of another (empathy; taking on a role/person **without falling into caricature**. Being able to see their side and to see them more as a person whether or not one’s mind is changed at the end. See more in the “what/evidence” section).

I want to continue this concluding/reflection document with less formal language and structure than a research paper because the entire experience has made an impact on me beyond a “traditional” academic level. I believe that this manner of writing will more accurately capture what I have learned and experienced now that I'm “on the other side.”

Note:

Some or many of my comments may make more sense once you have experienced the VTS Editor role play/simulation that I created. In addition, it is important to note that the mt work **is only a very small sample of what this platform and many others like it can do (and what others can do with it)**, especially in terms of combining augmented reality and artificial intelligence to produce even more realistic and almost real time changes, options, feedback, and learning in this “choose your own adventure” project. As ASSETT Project Manager, Amanda McAndrew noted to me: “x” may be familiar to others but it may be new to “you” (each of the ASSETT fellows); and it may already be in use, but you are attempting to use it in a new way.

I found this project with VTS editor to be more challenging than I anticipated. I cannot imagine how much more challenging it could have been if I was not compelled to go through some of the key steps of the fellowship. For example, I was able to see (not always a given these days) and work with others (my “fellow” ASSETT Fellows) over the course a few months to discuss a range of ideas and projects (the ideas and projects of others as well as my ideas and projects). We also discussed many other seemingly non-related key concepts around teaching, technology, etc (e.g., universal basic design; active learning and classrooms).

I want to note that when I make the statement “non-related,” I do **not** mean these words in a negative way. It easily could have been the case where we everyone was encouraged to simply

focus on their own projects or just some narrow set of topics—and stay in their “silos” in terms 5

Please do not use this document, my VTS editor/simulation, or any related materials for this project in print, email, video, etc. without the written permission of the author. of academic disciplines and the focus of their projects. This did not happen. The breadth and depth—or the range (to use and borrow it as seen in the eponymous book, *Range: How Generalist Triumph in a Specialized World*)—that was experience in those first few months of the fellowship help me on a personal level as well as on the project itself. Among many benefits: I was exposed to people and ideas that I may not have sought out on my own and/or may have avoided or seen as unnecessary. **If I had to add a suggestion, I wish that this experience (even in a more abridged form) could have continued throughout the entire fellowship (with a mix of scheduled meetings and open “office/meeting/happy” hours).** In other words because of this range I was able to have some questions they didn't you know that I had or see some things that I didn't see in the first place or thought I saw him was able to see a new light.

I am proud of what I was able to accomplish with VTS editor. When I have spoken with others and briefly shown them the work, they also agree (**and hopefully you will see, feel, and agree with the others and the sentiments expressed here, too, once you experience what I have created**). Again, as noted above, it is not new technology to many people and it is “plug and play” (although still very intricate and challenging). Nevertheless, it is new to me and I am on the long road to developing a whole new set of skills as well as revisiting my current skills and projects in the classroom. In addition, the exchanges that I am looking to create and have with this platform may be new in some of the following ways: new in terms of their use in the classroom (vs. in a corporate setting. It would definitely be new in my home department/program ); It would not simply be the pro forma training modules from a human resources department on discrimination, harassment, etc. that most of us grudgingly take and “fly” through them; without “getting” much from them (I do understand that part of the constraints is likely due to company, state, and even federal policies and laws to convey very specific information in a very specific format with a very specific end result).

When I looked at the “behind the scenes” of the program and even when I looked at my finished product (and its “behind the scenes” look), **it seems impossible.** To paraphrase what Clint Carlson said to me (Clint also works at the University of Colorado and he has been **tremendous help to me**):

VTS Editor and things like it is similar to learning a different language (again, even as a “plug and play” system). You really can only learn it by doing it. And, Jeff, you are doing it. Be proud.

A lot of times—at least my experience with VTS Editor, **your ideas get well ahead of your skills with VTS Editor** and that can be frustrating. One often has to slow down—a lot—and look at tutorials built into the platform or search for tutorials. Sometimes, one must just go

through trial and error to find a way to make something work that may not be explicitly 6

Please do not use this document, my VTS editor/simulation, or any related materials for this project in print, email, video, etc. without the written permission of the author. discussed anywhere (and I had the both frustrating as well as joy-filled experiences of all of these options). **It is said that it takes approximately 45 minutes of work for every one minute of edits for a movie.** This is how it can feel with VTS Editor, which is not a negative statement about the program. I cannot imagine how much longer it would take if the program was not so user friendly and “plug and play.”

I initially thought--as mentioned above—that my use of this program would really “show” or be “evidence of success” on the output side; once the simulations were completed and once I used it in my classes (with students using my pre-constructed simulations, students constructing their own simulations, or, possibly, a mix of both). **“Spoiler alert:” I never made it to the deployment stage.** Among other things (and you will see below), a lot of my mental and physical energy was spent on my regular classes and work, on the classes that had the in-person simulations that I have mentioned above, and on my spouse and two young kids at home –under the ages of 7 (my family were also “compelled” to be part of my brainstorming crew and “testers”). In terms of the classes with the in-person simulations, I am constantly seeking ways to scaffold, support students through, and update them. The same prompt can be given 5 times in the same class or among different classes and it will be done differently—often very differently—each and every time; and here is where after all of the scaffolding and guidance, one relinquishes control and trust their students (to perform and to engage with respect and significant, well-intentioned, and meaningful feedback). Sometimes, likely unconsciously, I looked at the challenges with these real life prompts/simulations and I likely could not see how I could pull this “VTS Editor thing” off; especially when one sees what it looks like “behind the scenes.”

What I mean here (before my “spoiler alert” message) is that I thought if I could make a few simulations for students, for example, that this would allow from to do some of the things that I mentioned above about the use of VTS Editor in medical schools. I thought it would allow students in my classes to have a safe place to make mistakes, practice empathy, and learn from feedback and/or debrief with others and me; especially in terms of tackling difficult or sensitive issues from race, gender, and historical inequities and connecting them to the present **using course materials, current-day materials, and discussions.** I think that this is still the case as one will likely **see and feel** with this project that tries to tie together intellectual items and engagement (e.g., core readings, videos, etc.), scaffolding with instructions, examples, check-ins, etc. before the start of the project, as the project is on-going, and as the project is experienced and/or presented through the use of live back and forth among students as well as a debrief. **Again, my project is a very small sample of what programs like VTS Editor can do and what others have done with these programs.**

**I was surprised** to find that I experienced much of **what I thought could only come from the**

“output”/“evidence of success”/“finished product” side as I was attempting to construct the 7

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actual scenario itself. Almost like a great playwright from Shakespeare to Lin Manuel Miranda (Miranda of *Hamilton* and *Moana*, which have made it to Broadway, the big screen, or both), you have a vision for the start middle and end, the nadir, climax, and denouement point(s), and overall takeaways. While you are doing this you must inhabit the mind of multiple characters dash their motivations with their fears et cetera also balancing and keeping your own thoughts motivations and fears inside, and not losing yourself waiting the game or simulation itself or the characters. You want to balance the force with the individual trees. You want to remember that this is supposed to be fun (and so much fun you can lose yourself on the most minute details such as getting the perfect facial expression or the timing of a few words) but also deal with real and sometimes real life and death situations and stakes. And so much more.

**Again, I was surprised to have these experiences (which is also what learning, science, and life is all about)** and realized that there is likely overlapping as well as different benefits and challenges if you construct the simulations for the students as well as allowing students to do it for themselves (**with significant assistance and scaffolding**). In terms of the latter (students or I doing this ourselves) and returning to my comments above, **I really found it to be a significant intellectual and empathetic experience**. By doing the work to create and inhabit this world (from the characters to the overall world/simulation itself), I found myself **less likely**--not more—to engage in caricature, **more likely**—not less—to provide balance, **more likely**—not less—to have to step inside of the thoughts of another as if they were my own,\* less likely—not more—to really get some of the key lessons that were mentioned above: tackling tough current issues; seeing things from different perspectives; making mistakes; learning in real time as I wrote and re-wrote and thought and re-thought the dialogue, start-end points, options, etc. in this “choose your own adventure.” I had these experiences well before I had completed the project.

\*and in these prior one or two points, even though I knew the “end point,” the larger messages that I was trying to convey, and the “tricks” that I was trying to deploy to engage the user and have them re-think what they believed and thought they knew, and even though I ha my own preferences on key items/issues/outcomes in the simulation (e.g., I sometimes found myself rooting for one character over another or looking to make one the “hero” and one the “foil”—even though I knew all of this like a master puppeteer, this process (and. Maybe it is the interactive nature and how is given the freedom, capacity, and sometimes onerous ability to construct each and every feature and choice), I was invested in the individual components and the overall “thing.” I was invested in a way that I did not want any character, for example, to simply be a “foil.” I had spent too much time “creating” them, “in their heads,” and thinking of the world from their perspective (whether or not I also held the same) as I sought to have them “attack and parry” in a way that would make a coach or parent proud (one who has spent countless hours shuttling an athlete or child to and from practice, for example) to allow any of the

characters to be “castaways,” “strawmen,” or “filler.”

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Although I have assigned role-playing simulations like these that have done students in the classroom acting this out live and they are working groups me experience some of the things maybe I was not able to do as the creator of the situation since I was doing by myself I still believe this be to give them a similar as well as a different type of experience and surprisingly maybe even the better one because they have to physically visually map it out almost like coding each and every point and exciting and excruciating detail and effort whether they're doing it on their own or in a group

I've also come to appreciate the need for the individual space and time (on a given day and over days, weeks, and months) to get into deep thought and work on various personal and intellectual endeavors (from brainstorming to “doing”) as well as alternating between collaborating with others (even if sometimes one feels that they work best by themselves). Here is an example or two:

I know that this would not have been possible on my own. For example, while the university and much of the world was still in the midst of Covid-19, I randomly ran into Amanda McAndrew, the Project Manager of ASSETT. Coincidentally, we were both viewing and testing a new class in the CASE building that had active learning capabilities and technology. She was with a few other people and I was by myself. Through this interaction, she encouraged me to apply for this fellowship.

Prior to applying for this fellowship ,I attended a semester long gamification series that engaged participants with a lot of the features that I have mentioned above such as: exposing participants to a range of things that at the time they may or may not have believed was relevant. Among other things and people, this put me in touch with the fantastic Clint Carson. I have met with Clint virtually and in-person just like Amanda McAndrew. Both of them, especially Clint in terms of his extensive knowledge technology in the classroom, simulations, and virtual reality (I joke with him that he is building a Terminator--yes, like the movie—system), he has always been so generous with his time expertise. He makes things understandable to novices like me even though his work makes my work look like “baby scribbles” in relation to what he has done.

These aspects have been that much more important given that no one else in my department/program has done something like this and I have I've done almost all of this on my own time with my own resources and/or does that I have earned outside of my department/program.

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Please see the attached brief video, photos, and/or export file of my simulation. To access the file, you can open it on your own (you will likely need to create a VTS Editor account or access it through the university/college if there is already an institutional account). Here you should see a lot of what I mentioned above in terms of “behind the scenes.”

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