Marinetta Ombro: a culture not a classroom

Tags: chapter | gamification | virtuality

This essay is a (slightly) revised version of a chapter included in *Transforming Virtual World Learning*, edited by Randy Hinrichs and Charles Wankel. The book was published in 2011 by Emerald: London. Full details of the book are available here.

Abstract

In 2002 Arcada began an experiment that aimed to develop a learning laboratory in the form of a virtual culture embodied in an online world. This essay examines how and why this was attempted; the opportunities that it offered; and the reasons why the experiment was ended. It draws from interviews with staff and students, both during and after the project, as well as papers and reports written as the project evolved. Marinetta Ombro was designed to explore several possibilities inherent in online worlds, other than their use as “virtual classrooms”: possibilities that were intended to derive a pedagogical approach that drew from the core features of multi-user worlds, rather than ignoring them. These included the ever-present possibility of creative disruption. The essay presents a case study that focuses on an approach to virtuality that was genuinely challenging and innovative. It offers practical and theoretical insights, including a sample learning plan, for educators wishing to explore virtual worlds as well as those wishing to reimagine their current work.

Introduction

Marinetta Ombro was an experimental virtual world that was begun at Arcada University in early 2002, and maintained and developed by staff and students until late 2009. The essay outlines the purposes for which this world was devised, looks briefly at its development, and describes a range of educational uses to which it was put. Lessons are drawn from these descriptions.

Because of the nature of Arcada, and the nature of the virtual world that was created, it is necessary to begin by clarifying some of the background to the project.

About Arcada

Arcada is a university of applied science, in Helsinki, Finland. It is a relatively small institution with approximately 2,000 students. Its official languages are Swedish and English, and it has grown out of the amalgamation of four polytechnics. As a result its ethos is academic, but its bias is still vocationally-directed. Because of its size, teaching in Arcada takes place in groups that are small even by European standards. The four-year BA course in online media accepts 12 students each year, and the Film & Television School, of which it is a part, accepts a total of 36 students.

The unusually low teacher/student ratio affects the creation of course plans and lesson plans; the flexibility within courses; and the forms of assessment used. Many classes contain between six to twelve students, and thus class goals can often be supplemented, and in some cases completely replaced, by individual learning plans. Assessment is carried out primarily through project work, self-assessment and discussion during and after courses. Although students are asked to fill in formal questionnaires the low numbers in each group mean that statistical analysis of the results of these exercises has a limited value.

About Arcada’s educational theory

From its inception Arcada has adopted an active learning, social constructivist approach to education, which recognizes that students are unique individuals, that learning is social, and that students learn through discovery. This is especially true within the Film & Television School, where first year students begin making movies or web sites within a few weeks of enrolling. Instruction here complements ongoing practical work, and is specifically designed to challenge students by proceeding ahead of their development and alongside their current project, since constructivist theory suggests that learning occurs within a zone of proximal development, defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through problem solving under ... guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978).

In practical terms the views of learning within the department draw upon those of John Holt (1978), expressed in his declaration that he never saw himself as practising the violin, only as playing it badly in the hope of later playing it better. More formally, the department draws upon the revised Bloom taxonomy, as amended and updated by Lorin Anderson(2001), where the original noun-based formulation is replaced by a set of verbs, with a consequent move from learning objects to learning processes.

At the time when the Marinetta Ombro project was first under discussion Tore Ståhl, a colleague at Arcada, was undertaking research into the relevance of the Bloom taxonomy to virtual learning environments. He concluded (Ståhl, 2004) that the optimal use of virtual learning environments would “require a dynamic and not necessarily a linear use of different spaces during different phases of the educational process, a strategy already used e.g. within problem-based learning”.

In further developing this understanding the online media team has moved to a position close to the framework proposed by Andrew Churches (2007). This seeks to find a place within the work of Bloom and Anderson for the new (and typically digital) activities such as ‘bookmarking’ and ‘podcasting’ that have come to...
Marinetta Ombro: a culture not a classroom

constitute important means within the taxonomy of learning processes.

These, then, were the theoretical bases upon which Marinetta Ombro was conceived.

About Marinetta Ombro

In 2002 Arcada owned a cable channel in a small town outside Helsinki for which the television students had to produce programs each week. Even though the channel had very few viewers it shaped all the students’ studies. Everything they did was both a learning exercise and a contribution towards the television schedule. Project deadlines were also an inflexible commitment to fill a certain time-slot on a certain date.

Students were encouraged to believe that they were not practising, but rather making real programs for a tiny, little-known channel in the belief that one day they would be making programs for a large, publicly acknowledged channel. From the perspective of social constructivism, the complexity of the learning environment was designed to reflect “the complexity of the environment that the learner should be able to function in at the end of learning” (Knowles et al, 2005).

The television station acted as an over-arching project-based environment for the film and television students, and in 2002 it was agreed that a similar learning environment should be established for the online media students. According to the initial project documentation (Kelly, 2010) this projected environment was “intended to act as a laboratory within which students could test their ideas; improve their planning, design and programming skills; and then watch as their experiments had real and lasting effects”.

After consultation between staff and students it was decided that the learning environment should take the form of a virtual world. The precise nature of this world was the subject of a lengthy discussion (Kelly, 2006), at the end of which it was agreed that the virtual world should take the form of a small Mediterranean island, located approximately halfway between Malta and Crete, and that all those involved should act as though what was being created was the digital simulation of a real island.

The virtual island was named Rosario, and its native language was deemed to be derived from Ido. The main village on the island was named Marinetta. The project itself was then titled Marinetta Ombro, which translates from Ido as ‘The Shadow of Marinetta’.

Marinetta Ombro: project overview

Marinetta Ombro was originated and supervised by Owen Kelly and Camilla Lindeberg, who were the full-time lecturers for Arcada’s online media course. We were responsible for leading and overseeing the project’s development.

Our decision that all those involved in Marinetta Ombro should act as though what was being created was the digital simulation of a real island may at first seem over-complicated, but it arose from our understanding of the term ‘virtual world’. This understanding needs to be examined because it differs from, and is in contradiction to, a use that has become fashionable in some educational circles in the period since the Marinetta Ombro project began.

Definitions

The project began with the decision to create a virtual world. All the participants rapidly realized that this term was open to many interpretations. It was, however, a phrase that could usefully be pulled apart, examined, and then put back together again.

Richard Bartle, the originator of the first MUD, had done just that (Bartle, 2003). He defined the term as follows:

>virtual: that which isn’t, having the form or effect of that which is.

>world: in this context, a world is an environment that its inhabitants regard as being self-contained. It doesn’t have to mean an entire planet. It is used in the same sense as ‘the Roman world’ or ‘the world of high finance’.

From this we drew a clear distinction between ‘virtual worlds’ and ‘virtual spaces’, and it is this distinction that lay behind many of the steps that were taken in the development of the project.

A virtual space is an illusion projected onto a computer screen by specialised software. This illusion provides a set of visual cues that enable a user to imagine that they are looking into, or are actually inside, a three dimensional environment. Usually this illusion is detailed enough to enable the viewer to describe this environment by reference to the real world, and to differentiate one such environment from another.

In 2011 this kind of virtual space is provided by companies such as Teleplace who promote the spaces as immersive alternatives to video conferencing. The spaces are generic in design and isolated from each other. Users can rent an office space, or a lecture theatre, or an arena. Each space has been designed to appear realistic enough not to cause users any distraction. Users can interact, access media that has been uploaded and, if the space has been subdivided, move from one virtual area to another. Users cannot usually leave the building, though, because the virtual space has no ‘outside’ and is not part of anything larger than itself. It is isolated by design because its function is not exploration, but to facilitate purposeful interaction between a known group of people with a shared agenda.

A virtual world, on the other hand, is analogous to something like ‘the Roman world’ or ‘the world of high finance’, which is say it cannot simply be defined by its geometry. The ‘world of fashion’, for example, is not just a collection of clothes. The ‘world’ evoked here includes interlocking sets of aspirations and attitudes; a wide range of actors from designers to models to journalistic, as well as calendar events and the various venues at which these events are held.

From this perspective the reconstruction in Second Life of the Cité de l’architecture at place du Trocadéro, one of the venues for the Paris Fashion Week, and the creation of suitable clothing, would not constitute the creation of a virtual ‘world of fashion’. It would simply be a virtual space with a particular kind of decoration.

To create a ‘world of fashion’ would be a much more complex operation, and one that many educators might feel irrelevant to their needs. It would involve creating or invoking a virtual culture within which the clothing, the events, and the
venues, made a self-contained sense (Kelly, 2004).

That was precisely what was attempted at Arcada with the Marinetta Ombro project. We intended to create the culture of Marinetta, a culture in which the students would be foreigners, and to depict this immersively. We intended this virtual culture to be coherent (that is, to make consistent sense once its axioms were accepted), and for students to engage with this as they would any new and unfamiliar environment.

We expected this 'otherness' to be a key feature of the project, which was why we did not begin to create a virtual space of any kind until our research had told us what we could expect to find there.

**Aims**

The aim of the project was four-fold. We wished to provide:

1. a new kind of environment for distance learning;
2. a laboratory for cultural studies;
3. a test-bed for web applications;
4. a framework for in-house apprenticeships.

Almost all the online environments that we had seen suffered from the fact that they were designed for one single purpose. Some were designed for distance learning; others were designed for entertainment such as role-playing games. The real world, however, never works like that. People walk the same streets and sit on the same train for very different reasons.

Arcada’s intention was to create a multi-purposed world: a world that was unpredictable because it was multi-purposed and where learning online was just one of the possible activities taking place.

We believed that this would allow for spontaneous interactions that were unplanned yet fruitful. We also believed that if the environment that we created was rich enough then learning how people used the world and what people wanted from it would provide students with valuable experience in the fields of monitoring and marketing, as well as in planning and design.

The project was promised on the idea of ‘creative interference’: a belief that single purpose institutions do not reflect how (or where) learning actually happens. We believed that by making the world genuinely open for almost any kind of use, residents would find that they were often and unexpectedly surprised and challenged; just as a tourist is surprised and challenged walking down the streets of a foreign city for the first time.

**Methodology**

At the beginning of the project we had a goal but no clear road map. We adopted the open-ended approach recommended by Albert Einstein (quoted in Marti, 2006), when he asserted that “if we knew what it was we were doing it would not be called research, would it?” We set an initial three year period of exploration with the intention of conducting an assessment at the end of it.

We were aware when we began that in many educational institutions there “is little room in today’s educational climate for technologies that do not either accelerate or greatly increase learning”, and that “many learning games do not demonstrate a sound, efficient educational or instructional design” (Warren, Jones and Lin, 2011). Fortunately the size and structure of Arcada meant that we were freer of these constraints than many of our colleagues. Thus we were able to make the construction of the project a part of the project itself. Rather than creating a virtual world within which learning and instruction could take place we began by placing all the key aspects of the creation of a virtual world on the student curriculum.

The initial methodology for constructing the world consisted of aligning the term projects within existing classes in such a way that these projects could be aggregated into a larger whole. This was made possible by the project-based instruction at the heart of Arcada’s programs. Since almost all classes would conclude with a practical project designed to demonstrate learning outcomes then our task was to devise projects that would progress one aspect or another of the emerging virtual world.

It is important to note that we did not begin with the software. We did not program a virtual space and then decide what to put in it, or how to act in it. We did not have any world within which users could move and interact for the first fifteen months of the project. Our methodology was founded upon asking questions in classes that ranged from Media Theory to Foundations of Photoshop.

Initially those questions focused on the difference between virtual spaces and virtual worlds, beginning with questions such as “where does the Paris-ness of Paris lie?” , “what are the core elements of a sense of place?” and “how could these be depicted on a screen?”. Later, as core decisions were made, the questions became more specific.

**Procedure**

At the start of each academic year we established one or more annual goals. In the first year the goals had been to “discover the culture and history of Rosario”, and to “research technologies for realizing the village of Marinetta on the internet”. In the second year we moved onto visualizing the culture and building an online depiction of Marinetta using SCOL Technology, a promising French software that failed to gain support and subsequently faded away.

We reviewed our goals twice a year, adjusting them where circumstances required.

We established a staff/student forum that met at least once a month, and usually more often. The purpose of this was generate ideas and feedback, and to give us early warning signs about likely problems or issues.

**Milestones**

Marinetta Ombro passed a series of milestones through which its progress could be measured. The following is a summary, given to provide the reader with a brief glimpse into the project’s life. There are more detailed descriptions available elsewhere (Kelly, 2010).

We began the project with a year of research, during which we questioned, what we meant by ‘virtual world’, explored mechanisms for creating a virtual culture
In 2003, we launched the first online version of the world, using a SCOL Technology server and client software.

In 2004 we launched several related web sites. The first was a site that documented two thousand years of the island's history in great detail. The second was La Voix, a newspaper-styled site that documented the development of the project as it happened. The third was a site posing as a genuine tourism site, providing details of the island’s highlights.

We also published a set of five e-books containing a complete history of Rosario in terms of people, places and events.

In October 2005, we bought private land in Second Life, where we launched the third version of the online world. This expanded to model the entire island of Rosario over nine sims.

In 2006 a three meter square model of Rosario was constructed by business and engineering students for an exhibition in Helsinki. This was used by the business students, for a public presentation of the data collected in a project discussed later in this essay.

In 2007 we held an open day, Semano Semano, in Second Life that attracted large crowds.

In 2008, as part of the celebrations for the Eurovision Song Contest in Helsinki, we created a set of machinima that were broadcast on Finnish television and held a second Semano Semano that attracted over 800 visitors in twenty four hours. This, too, is described below.

In 2009 we realized that the current project had gone as far as it could. The context within which we worked had changed dramatically since 2002, due to the advent of always-on mobile media, and we closed the project to regroup and think again.

**Learning Projects in Marinetta**

This section looks at the role of Marinetta Ombro as an over-arching environment for the online media students. During its lifespan it was used much more widely than we had planned. The business, computer technology, healthcare, television and tourism courses all made use of it to enhance their instruction. This section describes a representative series of uses to which the virtual world was put, in approximate chronological order. The headings refer to the title of the class.

**Structuring Information**

The first year Structuring Information class were given an initial assignment when we began envisioning the virtual culture of Rosario. They worked under the guidance of a third year student who intended to use the process as research for his thesis.

**Input.**

The students were told to develop strategies for inventing a logical and coherent history for the island. They were told that they had to allow for an unknown number of future contributors to be able to insert additions to the history as they were needed, and that they had to provide a mechanism that would render these internally consistent and believable.

**Action.**

The students decided that the most general historical and geographical information could be deduced by comparing the histories and geographies of Malta and Crete, with some reference to southern Italy; and the history and geography of Libya, with some reference to Tunisia and Egypt. By averaging these, and then deciding at each point whether the island’s development was affected most by Europe or Africa, the students produced a very general view of Rosario’s development.

A detailed history was then compiled using a methodology that involved looking for genuine gaps in official records and then inserting Rosario into them. One student sought to find a reason for a link between Swedish culture and Rosario. His work illustrates the approach that the group developed.

He found that in “859 a Viking expedition under the command of the legendary Ragnar Lodbrok, left Sweden for the Mediterranean Sea with 62 ships. At first they were beaten by Christian and Moorish armies, but at Gibraltar their luck turned and they plundered the city of Algiers and then continued to the Moroccan coast and Balsanema … They returned to Sweden in 862, after further battles, with only 20 of the 62 ships remaining.” (Weckstrom, 2004)

There is an eighteen month gap in the historical record where the Vikings’ activities are unrecorded. Using this historical fact he wrote Swedish culture into Rosarian history in a way that would be completely convincing if Rosario actually existed.

**Outcomes.**

The insights gained during the course were broadened through references to other scenarios where this technique might be professionally useful. The group looked at material relating to the development of Star Trek, Hill Street Blues and other television series set in consistent, but entirely fictitious, locales.

Critical thinking was encouraged as the group assessed each other’s ideas in relation to group-developed notions concerning the boundaries of believability. First year students learnt to work in teams as they were forced to champion their ideas, while being prepared to drop them when they were successfully challenged. The third year student decided to devote his thesis entirely to the issue of creating believable back-stories and environments for online virtual worlds (Weckstrom, 2004).

**Concept Design and Branding**

In Autumn 2003, a group of third year students began a course on brand development. The aim of this course was to examine the ontology of brands, and the ways in which narrative, advertising, web sites and other media can be made
This was the first course to be taught entirely within the framework of Rosarian culture.

**Input.**

In previous years students had been told to invent an imaginary brand (a cola or toothpaste); create a package for it; and make a presentation explaining its brand values.

This time the students had to work within a complex framework. In addition to the previous year's tasks students also had to create a display in Marinetta in the form of hoardings, shop fronts or vehicles designs.

**Action.**

The students had to survey what had already been done, and then decide what was possible on the island; what was wanted by the island's consumers; and what the company's competition would be, based on the existing records.

Students created brand names and slogans in Ido in addition to creating packages using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. They created in-world advertising campaigns. Finally they made fifteen minute presentations in English, as though they were pitching ideas for a campaign in a foreign country, with all the explanations of ideas, idioms and language involved in such a process.

**Outcomes.**

As the students explored the documentation created in the previous year, the feedback loops in the project became clear to both staff and students. Some students found that the information they felt they required did not exist, and so it had to be created before they could access it.

The need to create slogans in Ido forced them to consider language as sounds and shapes in as well as meaning. Freed from the (often unnoticed) inhibitions of being amusing in their mother-tongue they were able to focus on their slogans as pictograms and music as well as meaningful utterances.

**Research Methods for Health Care**

Staff in other departments at Arcada became interested in the project but initially they were more enthusiastic about the conceptual framework, than its manifestation on the web. Many departments had been using primitive simulations of different kinds in their teaching and several members of staff recognized that there could be significant benefits in finding ways of incorporating these into the narrative of Rosario.

In Spring 2005 a lecturer in healthcare, approached us about using Marinetta in a class concerning research methodology for Public Health Nursing. In this class students were set a group assignment during which they were provided with sets of statistics for a (fictional) locality in Finland and told to to create a district health plan from them.

**Input.**

In previous years the staff took the figures from an undisclosed Finnish city and altered them a little before giving them to the students. Every year the brighter students guessed what kind of city the figures related to, and often what city they were more enthusiastic about the conceptual framework than its manifestation on the web. Many departments had been using primitive simulations of different kinds in their teaching and several members of staff recognized that there could be significant benefits in finding ways of incorporating these into the narrative of Rosario.

The students received two lectures on the history and culture of Rosario, as an introduction to the class. These included discussions on employment patterns and leisure activities.

The students then began their calculations. They were allowed to email and ask for more figures, or for more details regarding the figures they had already been given. They did this several times, and we sat and generated the figures they had asked for, using the same formulae each time.

**Outcomes.**

The project was enthusiastically received by the students. The trainee nurses had had to research health issues on comparable (real) Mediterranean islands, and they had found this an interesting and engaging starting point for what they felt might otherwise have been a rather dry exercise. One said that “it was useful to be forced to look at healthcare in other parts of the world and to have to think about problems that are not the same as Helsinki problems”. Another said simply that “we should have more assignments like this”. The staff members involved also regarded the project as a success, and later expanded the idea to include health plans for all the nine villages on the island.

**Entrepreneurship Studies**

In 2005, a member of staff suggested a collaboration with the International Business course. He had been running an assignment based around a simulation in the form of a turn-based game where students created and managed a company. He sent them a set of financial data which they analyzed before making decisions, and returning a list actions to him. He would then run these through a spreadsheet before sending out the next set of data. He wished to set these companies on Rosario and have the students use the history, geography and statistical data as background material for the assignment.
The lecturer began by suggesting additions to the data we had amassed about Rosario. He was interested in the island’s natural resources, and about what industry already existed. Together the staff created a detailed economic history for the island. This included an overview of the Rosarian industrial revolution and a timeline of companies that had succeeded and companies that had failed.

Action.

For the 2005 course the students listened to a short series of lectures about Rosario before being told that they were to consider themselves international entrepreneurs with a set amount of capital. They had been told that Rosario was a market they should target. Their task was to devise a detailed business plan to establish a company in Rosario, and to ask whatever questions they wanted, if they felt that they needed further background information.

Outcomes.

Not only were the students highly enthusiastic about the assignment, they pushed us to create a more and more detailed picture of the island. It was no surprise that they demanded more economic information. However they also asked a range of questions regarding the trustworthiness of the local people, their attitude to work, whether they were socially adventurous or conservative, and the amount of immigration compared to emigration.

Finally they persuaded a group of engineering students to help them construct a three meter square scale model of the island, with detailed models of the various refineries and factories they had projected in their business plans. This was used on several occasions as part of public presentations at conferences and exhibitions.

This clearly demonstrated that, educationally, the virtual culture of Rosario was as powerful as the virtual landscape that was explorable on-screen. The ideas were proving as interesting as the furniture.

**Foundations of Photoshop**

The skills required to make clothing in Second Life are almost exactly the same as the skills that students learn in the Photoshop Foundations class: an understanding of channels, transparency, layers, layer masks, and file formats. In 2006 we combined the two in an assignment where students made and gave away clothing on Rosario.

Input.

Students were challenged to explore Second Life for a week in order to understand the current fashions and crazes; to pick something from these and then to design a range of clothing using the Photoshop skills they were learning.

Action.

The course began as usual, with introductory sessions looking at the toolbox. The students’ initial project was based around the creation of a range of postcards. In this course the source material was created by the students using screenshots from Second Life.

The final project brought together the skills they had learned through creating a range of clothing. A free clothing store, where each student had one or more vending machines, was established in Marinetta and advertised within Second Life. The decision to make the clothes ‘freebies’ was deliberate, and designed to reduce the complexity of the assignment. Forcing the students to guess a market value for their clothes was irrelevant to the assignment.

For their final presentation the students had to show the clothes they had made; explain how many they had been able to give away; and offer a self-critique of the process. Put simply: if you had not managed to give away any clothes then you had a lot of explaining to do!

Outcomes.

Most students enjoyed the assignment, and the majority felt that it was technically challenging. However a few students refused to accept that the assignment had much bearing on what they were supposed to be learning, because the outcome was not one that they regarded as useful professionally.

The course concluded with a heated debate about the relevance of Second Life to the class. This ended when one of the students announced that they had been commissioned for a (small) amount of real money to make some uniforms for an avatar they had met while exploring.

We learned that we were naive to assume that students would automatically find Second Life fascinating and enjoyable. From that point on, we made certain that we always introduced the Marinetta project by linking it to wider topics such as the unpredictable growth of the web, and the surprising ways in which businesses become successful online.

Providing a preliminary contextual presentation helped to minimize the number of future occasions in which students become hostile to the idea of learning in-world.

**Tourism & Media**

Arcada offers a degree in tourism management, and several of the courses concern strategies for the use of media. In 2006 staff decided that two classes, one containing students of tourism and one containing online media students, would work on a long joint project.

It was decided that Rosario would celebrate Semana Semano (which, literally, means Week Week in Idio), an annual festival that the history on the web site claimed was held each May.

Input.

In Arcada’s first year in Second Life a number of students attempted to start a club on the island, but it never worked. Although the club had visitors, it failed to attract or retain a regular crowd. It was therefore decided that we would have one
or two large public events each year that could be organised in the same way as film productions.

**Action.**

After a period of exploration and familiarization the online media students built a festival site, while the tourism students determined the festival program. Then both groups created and staffed the festival itself.

Initially, small groups of students set off to explore Second Life, document their explorations, and make presentations to the rest of the group. Their brief was to work out what was popular and then devise ways in which the festival could tap into that popularity for one weekend. Over eight weeks, the suggestions were refined into a potential program. At each stage the groups had to consider not only whether what was being suggested would be popular but also whether it would be feasible.

For the multimedia students the second phase became a series of design and programming tasks, which called for them to bring their specialist knowledge and experience to bear. For the tourism students, this phase involved deciding how they could generalize from the course in which they had made a marketing plan for a holiday resort and apply it to a virtual world that did not have mass media of the kind they were used to.

**Outcomes.**

Both groups were forced to think at length about why people were spending time in Second Life, and they reached an interesting set of conclusions. Most people spend time there doing rather than watching; being active rather than passive.

They decided that, for the majority of residents, these activities could be divided into four primary groups: shopping (and dressing up); socializing (at clubs, beaches, and malls); playing (parachuting, windsurfing, and so on); and creating (building and scripting).

The result of these deliberations was a 24-hour festival that consisted of treasure hunts, and games, with a festival beach club, and a row of shops giving away a range of free Rosarian clothes and accessories. The event attracted approximately 150 residents. Both groups of students were impressed the outcome. Organizing a successful virtual event had given them real satisfaction.

The tourism students were convinced that the work flow they had been through was directly comparable to that involved in running a real festival. One said, “I did not view the exercise as virtual at all. We were trying to attract real people during a real weekend and even if we were attracting them to a computer game we still had to attract the real them”.

**Cross Media Production**

In May 2007, Helsinki was due to host the Eurovision Song Contest, a huge media event that has been broadcast annually across Europe since 1956. It was decided at Arcada to expand the model of Semano, Semano for the occasion.

It was also decided that this would be the final production for the Cross Media Production class, and that it would be led by a student team consisting of three students from Helsinki and four exchange students from the Institute of Technology Tallaght, in Dublin; with additional help from several avatars that we knew only from meetings in Second Life.

**Input.**

We explained to the team what had happened the previous year. The group then decided to organize a night-time festival that would last for twelve consecutive nights. However, because Second Life has four hour days/night cycles, this meant that, in reality, Semano Semano would last for twelve one-hour sessions, taking place every four hours for two days.

**Action.**

The whole team worked for six weeks conceiving, building, designing and scripting the objects needed to transform a bare valley on the island into a festival site, with a lot of activities, and a lot of ‘freebies’.

We had, for example, a synchronised national dance in full Rosarian national costume. We also had a machinima of the banned Rosarian entry for the Eurovision Song Contest: a song (sung in Ido) called Al Dek Manto.

Students recorded and edited videos from inside SL. These proved to be very useful for the television students running live television feeds for Arcada’s cable channel, which broadcast 24 hours a day during the Eurovision week. The team was able to provide them with quirky context that they could drop into gaps in the schedules, and re-use whenever they needed to.

Non-stop television broadcasts were streamed live into La Moyena Valo, the festival valley in Rosario. Video taken in the valley was streamed out and broadcast on television in Helsinki, on the web, and over Finnish mobile phone networks.

During the twelve sessions of Semano Semano approximately 700 people participated in some sort of in-world activity. The numbers varied wildly from session to session; partly because we failed to appeal to as many American residents as we would have liked, and (judging from conversations we had) partly depending on what else was, or was not, happening in Second Life at the same time. Activities such as Terra Z races and skydiving were popular, though, every time people we hosted them.

The eleventh session took place the hour before the contest itself began, and was almost full from the outset. Because nobody wanted to leave, it simply carried on throughout the three hour televised contest. During this unplanned five hour party there were never less than thirty people in La Moyena Valo, and we estimated that over 100 people were there for at least fifteen or twenty minutes.

**Outcomes.**

The involvement of the Irish students sparked a collaboration between ITT in Dublin and Arcada in Helsinki that continues to this day.
The use of Rosario as material for us on television and mobile phone suggested a number of possibilities. During the debriefing that followed the project it was decided that some of these could better be explored outside the framework of Rosario. It was therefore agreed the the project would be ended after one more year, which would be devoted to documentation and technical experimentation in preparation for the launch of another unifying project.

This period saw the production of one more student thesis addressing the issue of building an environment to house and reflect a virtual culture (Gröndahl, 2010).

Lessons Learned

The Marinetta Ombro project was conceived as an environment that would, through its every design, present learning opportunities. For this reason it was created as a virtual culture presented within an online ‘world’. Our approach was one of immersion not augmentation, and the fictitious history of the island was as important for the possibility of learning as its virtual geometry.

Our plans were deliberately open-ended at the outset and allowed to develop freely. The reason for this was clear. In 2002 we did not know what opportunities a virtual world might present as a learning laboratory, and we did not believe that anyone else did too. Because the institution allowed us to, we adopted an exploratory approach and, as a result, Marinetta expanded in directions that we could not have predicted.

The arguments in favor of adopting an “official” language (Kelly, 2003) were neither imposed nor pre-planned. They were developed by students as the project was developed, out of perceived needs that grew organically. In this Marinetta Ombro was successful. It demonstrated the value of allowing learners to own the learning tools, and making the design and upgrading of those tools part of the curriculum.

However, there were areas the project was less obviously successful. The small size of the staff and student team made for efficient development. If the cohort had been one or two hundred there would have been a need for much more formalized procedures. However, once the island was created the small number of students became a disadvantage. There were never enough people involved at any time to create the significant mass that would have been needed to make the island of Rosario a phenomenon that was recognized throughout Second Life. If the island had been ‘inhabited’ by several hundred students then our efforts to draw in other users would have had more impact.

Although it is outside the scope of this essay, it should be noted that there were other groups of people using Rosario, ranging from a group of ‘herries’ who set up a colony in a disused corner, to a group of Australian artists who set up and managed a gallery for several years. This creative interference was useful at several levels. Firstly the existence of skilled builders spurred the students on. Secondly the sense of in-world community that developed gave the island a flavor that was not institutional or rule-bound.

Finally we discovered that the project had a lifespan that proved difficult to ignore. Lars Lundsten, a media philosopher, had warned us at the beginning that the initial excitement that the project generated would be difficult to sustain. He warned that within a few years students would arrive at Arcada and see Marinejg“MBa, the initial excitement that the project generated would be difficult to sustain. He warned that within a few years students would arrive at Arcada and see Marinejg“MBa, an established routine into which they were supposed to fit. An analysis of the final cross-media project clearly showed that the Irish students, who had arrived without any knowledge of Marinetta, had galvanized the other students. Their enthusiasm had encouraged the Finnish students to reclaim ownership of the project’s narrative:

The project was put into hibernation in large part because we recognised that this prediction had come true. Circumstances had indeed changed, but one of the changes was that Marinetta Ombro had become a part of the curriculum rather than a challenge to it. It was decided that the online media course should focus on augmentation for three years, as it applies to mobile media as well as the web, before looking again at immersion, the models and documentation created during the seven years of the Marinetta Ombro project.

Conclusions

The project raised three issues that seem worthy of further detailed research. The first of these concerned the use of the term “virtual worlds” in education. Used loosely this can often obscure differences that have important pedagogical consequences. It can bundle together projects that have different goals and different outcomes. There is a need for a taxonomy of virtuality that clearly spells out the possible spectrum from virtual spaces that can be used as controlled environments for problem based learning to virtual worlds where learning takes within a larger in-world culture. This issue was raised by Henrik Bennetzen (2006) in an influential paper on Immersion versus Augmentation. There is much that needs to be studied and tested in this field, if educationists are to consider, not just how virtuality might be used for learning, but how learning might be changed through exposure to virtuality.

The second issue concerns the nature of the relationship between what is modelled in virtuality and what is perceived in the real world. The Marinetta Ombro project suggested that this is a far from straightforward relationship, and certainly not one that should be taken for granted. Kenneth Ketner has suggested a fruitful approach to this problem in his writings about Charles Sanders Peirce’s method of diagrammatic inquiry. The propositions that “we schematise our perceptions diagrammatically”, and that “virtuality presents us with a powerful diagramming tool whether we notice it or not”, point toward areas that call for detailed exploration.

If we accept that much learning occurs through processes of diagramming then a third issue arises concerning the extent to which skills are gained merely through prolonged experience in a virtual environment, and the extent to which these skills are themselves transferable to real life. John C Beck and Mitchell Wade (2006) have demonstrated the educational power such background effects can have even when they are unintended.

These three issues spring from the same belief: that, during the Marinetta Ombro project, we were swimming tentatively in the shallow end of a very deep stream, and that it was the depths that warranted detailed research.

References


http://www.owenkelly.net/662/marinetta-ombro-a-culture-not-a-classroom/