CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN A VIRTUAL WORLD
- virtual worlds as teaching aids

CAMILLA LINDEBERG & OWEN KELLY

Arcada Polytechnic: School of Media – Metsänpojankuja 3 – 02130 Espoo, Finland

E-mail: camilla.lindeberg@arcada.fi

This paper describes a way of working with teaching in a field like new media; a method of teaching in a fast evolving field, where people more and more must teach themselves in order to keep up with the development in the techniques and trends. The paper outlines a course held in the autumn of 2003 in Arcada a Swedish speaking polytechnic in Finland. The aim of the course was to use a virtual world as a teaching aid for introducing concepts of brand management to media students.

1. Background

In the Spring of 2002 the Media Department at Arcada Polytechnic began a long-term initiative aimed at tying together the different strands of the multimedia courses. It was intended to provide an environment within which students and staff could devise projects. It took the form of a multi-user 3D environment, modeling Marinetta, the capital city of the Mediterranean island Rosario.

In August 2003 a group of 3rd year multimedia students began a course on brand development. The aim of this course was to examine the nature of brands, and the ways in which packaging, advertising, web sites and other media can be made to reflect the look, feel and 'values' embodied in a brand.

This was one of the first courses to be taught entirely within the Marinetta framework.

2. Marinetta, the capital of Rosario

Marinetta is the 3 dimensional reconstruction of the capital of Rosario, available on the Internet at www.marinetta.net. With a full culture and history, Marinetta in it self is an interesting project. Technically it is built with SCOL, a French 3D software, and makes use of Flash, MySQL and php to deliver a rich media experience.

The aim of Marinetta is to function as a multi-purpose environment suitable both for games, education and business. It provides environments for meetings as well as online lectures in the city's school, the Kollegio Ilana. It has a movie theater where QuickTime movies can be shown and a radio station that will stream music and radio plays.

Marinetta has been designed to facilitate a wide range of educational activities. Creating developing the on-line world has been the subject of several classes. The brand management course was the first attempt to use the environment to teach a subject not directly connected to the construction and management of the world.

Usually such a course would be taught in one of two ways. Either students would be invited to remodel an existing brand such as Coca Cola, as a hypothetical exercise, or they would be asked to invent a competitor to Coca Cola and design the logo and packaging for that. Our aim was to explore a third option for teaching concepts: an option based on detailed simulation in a laboratory-like parallel world with its own history and its own peculiar constraints.

3. The Brand Management Course

The course was structured as a series of lectures and workshops, followed by a large project. The project was to design a brand for Marinetta (that is, a virtual brand for a virtual world), and to realize this as a package and an advertisement.

The nature of the world had already been mapped out in detail by other students in the previous year. (The results of this are available as downloadable e-books at the Marinetta web site). Rosario has a detailed geography, along with a list of native animals, fish and vegetation. The size of the population has been measured, and there is a detailed chronicle of over 2,000 years of history.

The students were not therefore able to use whatever came into their heads. They had to ask themselves a series of questions – questions that a number of them found difficult to answer. They had to work out what was needed on the island; what would be possible to manufacture and distribute; and what its competitors would be.

Students were challenged to invent companies and the products that these companies manufactured. These were then branded and fitted into the concept of Rosario. Logos and packages were designed and placed in the worlds' capital Marinetta [1] as hoardings.

We have discussed the nature of a virtual culture elsewhere, but history is one of its necessary features. For this reason, the students were not supposed to invent a "new" company. Rather they were supposed to create a company with a history of its own, and to create the current packaging for one of its products.

4. The educational problem

The Finnish educational system is based on a traditional methodology whereby each subject is strictly taught in school. There is a clear distinction between the role of teacher and the role of student. This poses a problem for multimedia education at Arcada and elsewhere. One of the main challenges for the institution has been to take pupils who expect to be taught and change them into students with the initiative to learn on their own. One of the main (if unspoken) subjects on our syllabus has therefore been teaching our students to learn how to learn.

As a solution to this dilemma we have tried to structure our courses so that the students can actually make something real in order to implement the concept of teaching themselves. The creation of a virtual world with consistent rules, but a degree of flexibility that the "real world" does not possess, has been a part of this process.

5. Monitoring progress

At the beginning of the course we formulated four questions to enable us to monitor the pedagogical effectiveness of using a virtual world as a framework for the project work:

- Are the multimedia students skilled and interested enough to create concepts?
- Is there a problem between teaching and learning?
- Is task-based learning an open ended dilemma or a good teaching environment?
- How can the students be made to show their skills and use them fully?

6. The course

We had structured the course in two sections, one about the actual background and theory on branding and the second on design. The aim was that in the end we would have to products a fully planned virtual brand and a logo and package that fully fitted the profile of the brand.

In the first section we provided the students with theory on branding, marketing, logo design and color theory. We showed them other case studies and made them research a well-known existing brand. This concluded with the students writing a short report on an existing product.

In the second section the students were provided with the full history of Marinetta and Rosario. This consisted of four e-books that described the facts on geographical conditions, nature and wildlife on the island, as well as providing a list of all the businesses currently in Rosario, a list of the royal family and presidents and famous people of Rosario.

The students were told that they needed to fully understand these facts in order to create something that would belong to the world.

The biggest challenge for the students was to actually create a brand, do a marketing profile and figure out a target group for it. Not all of the students came up with an interesting concept that fitted inside the virtual world and its culture. Some seemed unwilling or unable to make the necessary imaginative leap.

We had thought that this would be an easy task as every piece of information was right in front of the students [2 & 3]. However, some of the students didn't seem to understand that they had to go through the learning process on their own.

At the end of the course we were presented with a wide range of projects. Some were a successful attempt to imagine life on the island and to design something that fitted in with that life. Others were confused attempts to do this, and a few seemed nothing more than simple remakes of a packet that might be found on a local supermarket shelf.

Examples of the finished projects will be made available in 2004 on the Marinetta web site.

7. Conclusion

Planning, developing and designing something virtual can be seen in some ways as more than actually doing it for "real". Some might say that in real life you have to please real customers but in a virtual world you don't have this problem. Marinetta is intended to overcome this.

This is not entirely true however. Creating something for a virtual world means that you have to follow the rules in the world, the same way you have to follow the rules of our society. Most of these rules are built in to us as part of a long process, a process that starts in infancy and continues the whole of our life.

When creating something for a virtual world and society this process is missing. The only way our students can create something for Marinetta is by learning and absorbing the rules we have created, discussing with his/her fellows and asking us for guidance when they are stuck. We were left feeling that we had perhaps underestimated the difficulties that some students would have in this process of absorption. The process of simulation has to begin with the student simulating the process by which they have absorbed their own culture!

This was the first year the students had to create design concepts for Marinetta. It seemed to be a harder task than we had imagined. The task didn't just teach the students something, it also taught the teachers. In creating something for a world and society we need to consider the internal rules, and we need to make sure that they are presented in a way that makes sense to all of the students encountering them for the first time. The process of absorption seemed easiest for those students who had, in one way or another, already developed techniques for this – by playing Dungeons and Dragons, for example, or by traveling extensively.

Next year the students will be facing an easier task, mainly because some of the confusion will be removed when we show the outcomes from this year.

We now know that we need to take the students deeper into the virtual world of Marinetta in order to create something in there. This will be a daunting task, as the world is developing all the time. We need to ensure that the guidebooks, and the transparency of the framework, develop in the same way and at the same pace as the island itself.

References:
1. http://www.marinetta.net
2. Brand Channel http://www.brandchannel.com (retrieved 30.09.2003). Brand Channel worked as a good resource for papers in branding. The students were given the URL and adviced to read some of the papers that could help them in creating their brands.
3. The Origin of Things, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam, 2003, NAi Publishers Rotterdam, Amsterdam. This book helped the students to see how design develops from a sketch to the actual thing.