

Constructing Transformations: <ground-c> A Learning Strategy for the Metaverse

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ABSTRACT

This text will attempt to delineate the premises of an immersive learning approach relating to the creative fields. This proposed strategy is specifically designed for implementation in online, three dimensional synthetic builder's worlds, also known as the Metaverse. Deviating from the prevalent practice of replicating physical art studio teaching strategies within a virtual environment, the author proposes instead to apply the fundamental principles of the "Groundcourse", developed and taught by Roy Ascott during the 1960's in England. While the educational philosophy of the Groundcourse does provide the backbone of the author's proposition; further aggregations of Ascott's cybernetic approach with educational strategies such as Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning is also deliberated upon.

Online, socially interactive virtual worlds provide their users with novel creative affordances, operating in an environment with its own unique conditions. Beyond the novelty of the learning environment itself, these worlds seem to cater to special user groups, with well defined goals and interests. Thus an examination of what it is that a metaverse can contribute to learning in the creative fields would also appear to be called for. It has been the observation of the author that one of the major avenues of creative investigation in three dimensional, socially interactive virtual worlds is the acquisition and enactment of novel identities and indeed multiple identities for the purposes of Role Play.

During the Groundcourse, with its emphasis on behavioral change as a founding principle for art education, Ascott also utilized the creation of new personalities as a major part of the learning process. It would thus appear that much insight can be attained from a critical examination and adaptation of the Groundcourse's strategies as a pedagogical model for art education in a metaverse, specifically in relation to the deliberate construction of 'identity' as a means for creative enablement.

KEYWORDS

Roy Ascott, Groundcourse, Transformative Learning, Experiential Learning, Metaverse, Role Play, Identity

INTRODUCTION

In his book "Exodus to the Virtual World" economist Edward Castranova predicts that a migration of considerable proportions from the physical realm to three dimensional, online worlds is to be expected within the next few decades. The anticipated outcome would be a demographic landslide of significant enough socio-economic impact to constitute a need for compelling changes in socio-political and economic strategies not only in the virtual but also the physical realm (Castranova, 2007).

Since creative practices are inextricably intertwined with the socio-cultural milieu within which they flourish, it would follow that vast change, not only in terms of the actual creative output itself, but also in terms of the context within which this creative output is generated is to be expected.

As appears to be the case with higher educational activity in the metaverse in general, at art educational institutions practicing in Second Life® today, teaching is usually seen as a mere extension of real life studio teaching, with teaching methodologies closely emulating what goes on in the physical campus.

However, the problem does not only reside in how learning processes are formulated within the virtual campus: Art Schools, be they physical or virtual, may need to adapt their learning strategies in the face of the oncoming landslide predicted by Castranova: While it may be premature to relinquish present day art educational methodologies in their entirety, nonetheless provision for change needs to be incorporated into the present day curriculum. It appears to be evident from present day creative activity embarked upon by the Residents of a metaverse such as Second Life® that this change will not only involve the attributes of the artistic output itself but will also need to take into account the changes in the behavior of the creator/users of artifacts as well as the usage and utility of the artifacts themselves. The locus itself; i.e., participative synthetic worlds will also need to be taken into account. Furthermore, an entirely novel student profile, comprised of mature player/learners who wish to further their abilities for enhanced virtually creative participation, may also find themselves at the doorsteps of art educational institutions within a foreseeable future.

THEORIES OF LEARNING

The Groundcourse

Combining cybernetics and constructivist educational theory, The Groundcourse created a learning environment which would *'enable the student to become aware of himself and the world, while enabling him to give dimension and substance to his will to create and change'* (Ascott, 2003); achieved through a drastic breaking down of preconceptions related to self, art and creativity. As such the learning strategy that was employed fostered the rethinking of preconceptions and fixations with regards to self, society, personal/social limitations, art and all the ensuing relationships through a carefully thought out and coordinated range of assignments and exercises that entailed behavioral modification and change.

The Groundcourse places the student at the centre of a system of visual education designed to develop in him awareness of his personal responsibility towards idea, persons and the physical environment such that he may contribute to a social context within which his subsequent professional activity may become wholly creative and purposive. The intention of the Groundcourse is to create an organism which is constantly seeking for irritation. The term "organism" may be applied to both the individual student and to the Groundcourse as a whole. (Ascott, 2003)

Ascott utilized the creation of new personalities as aids for behavioral change during the Groundcourse years. This corresponds to Role Play in online virtual worlds today. Cyberpsychological research also substantiates the importance of the acquisition of novel persona, indeed the acquisition of many alternative selves, for bringing about behavioral change within the virtual environment itself but also, by extension, in Real Life. In light of these correlations the author proposes a novel art educational strategy; custom tailored for online, three dimensional virtual worlds; based upon the Groundcourse's educational philosophy. Whilst Ascott's system is being placed at a pivotal point, Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning as well as research conducted in Cyberpsychology and Cyberanthropology are also given prominence in the formulation of this proposal.

Transformative Learning

Perspective Transformation, which is based on psychoanalytic theory and critical social theory, has been developed by Mezirow during the last quarter of the twentieth century. According to Mezirow *'Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings'* (Mezirow 1991: 167)

Transformative learning, which specifically addresses lifelong learning, is a process of getting beyond gaining factual knowledge alone to instead become changed by what one learns in some meaningful way. It involves questioning assumptions, beliefs and values, and considering multiple points of view. In theorizing about such shifts, Mezirow (1995) proposes that there are several phases that one must go through in order for perspective transformation to occur, suggesting that this happens through a series of phases that begin with the disorienting dilemma. Other phases include self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that others have shared similar transformations, exploration of new roles or actions, development of competence and self-confidence in these new roles, and reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives, *'concluding with a changed self-concept'* (1995).

While instrumental learning involves cause-effect relationships and learning through problem solving, communicative learning systems, such as Transformative Learning necessitate actively negotiating one's way *"through a series of specific encounters by using language and gesture and by anticipating the actions of others, thus attaining insight which provides common ground through symbolic interaction with others"* (Mezirow, 1991:78).

While Grabov (1997: 90) views Transformative Learning as an *'intuitive, creative, emotional process'*, for Boyd, transformation is a *'fundamental change in one's personality involving the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration'* (Boyd 1989: 459). Boyd emphasizes discernment as an integral component of the learning process (Boyd and Myers 1988), calling upon sources such as symbols, images, as well as archetypes to assist in creating values of discernment as aids to personal strategies of meaning as to what it means to be human (Cranton 1994).

Whilst tackling the problem from different perspectives, it is nonetheless noteworthy that both Ascott and Mezirow seem to have placed the notion of a *'changed self-concept'* in juxtaposition to educational strategies at the heart of their inquiries. A further parallel lies in the emphasis which both Mezirow and Ascott place upon lifelong learning: As early as 1966 Ascott (2003) alerts readers to the emergence of "a new, leisured class" that will be involved in creative pursuits, furthermore a class which falls outside of the boundaries of traditional art educational practice in that it will in all likelihood be comprised of learners of diverse age groups. Current practices of creative participation and sharing via www2 domains seem to validate this early claim of Ascott's, who structured his learning system as a fluid, symbiotic construct within which diverse learner groups could be accommodated.

THE METAVERSE

Metanomics and the (Virtual) Three Dimensional Collage

What makes a search for unorthodox strategies for art educational content particularly relevant at this juncture is the continued success of Second Life®, which made its debut in 2003 as the first socially interactive, three dimensional virtual world that allows its users to retain property rights to the virtual

objects they create in an online economy. One of the founding strategies behind Second Life® was the notion that the world would draw a cadre of elite content creators whose endeavor would be noteworthy enough that it would attract sizable numbers of players into joining the world to make usage of their output (Castranova, 2007). While this early vision does indeed seem to have materialized, an unexpected development also seems to be in the offering: What makes the world particularly compelling as a platform of creative expression is the largely unstructured nature of the creative activity which the first order user generated content seems to breed quite spontaneously in its turn:

Creative output in the metaverse becomes interactive in the truest meaning of the word. Far from being work meant to be viewed and admired but not to be interfered with in any fundamental way, design output as well as art objects are manipulated, re-structured and combined with others as fits the needs of the present owner; to suit specific purposes, such as props in playful activity, photography and video sessions, environmental decor and, of course, avatar appearance. The roles and stories enacted often find their origins in the combined visual elements of the assemblage/collage which seems to have instigated the process of make-belief: Thus, akin to their Dadaist predecessors, the assembly of unrelated objects seems to go as noteworthy a distance virtually as they do physically in the instigation of associative creativity. Indeed possibly acceleratedly so in virtuality, when the contributions which a coded domain can bring to bear upon the expression of the fantastical is also taken into account: Unconscious processes, which may disclose themselves in diverse creative manifestations, particularly as masks or persona created for Role Play sessions, are par for the course in the synthetic lives of users and extended user groups. Indeed so powerful seems to be the pull of constructing alternative states of being through these virtual collages, that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the pursuit of these is at least one of the key joys of many a synthetic existence.

Constructing Multiple Identities: The Alt Avatar

Possibly the most compelling usage of the above described conglomerations is during the construction of multiple identities: Alt avatars are secondary accounts created by a single user in a virtual world. These secondary 'alt' accounts are created to embody alternative selves *'in which the more fundamental personality of the real person is still driving in the background but filtered through a different surface persona'* (Boellstrof, 2008). Alt avatars would appear to be created with the aim of exploring the multiple facets of a singular person. This task is often accomplished through a complex network of social interactions: In some cases alt avatars will have entirely autonomous social lives, moving in circles that can be similar or very different from those of the main avatar. However, equally common are shared social lives between the main avatar and any number of his or her alt avatars. It is when these joint lives involving multiple facets of one single user are enacted that the appearance of the alt avatars begins to acquire considerable significance, especially when placed in juxtaposition to the appearance of the main avatar:

Typically the main avatar is designed to look like the idealized version of the Real Life persona. Conversely, alt avatars can manifest in vastly different configurations. They can be of the opposite sex or even often androgynous and may possess non-human attributes. Furthermore, avatars can also be expert shape shifters, manifesting in many diverse forms even within a time span comprised of a few hours, if not indeed minutes. These deviations from the physical attributes of the human handler can be so pronounced that virtual world residents often refer to their alt avatars as a 'costume' or a 'mask', thus emphasizing the difference between their Real Life selves and the alternative persona they project through the alt avatar.

Following from the above, the following questions constitute the backbone of the authors investigation: Can the diverse persona embodied in alt avatars be utilized in a manner similar to Roy Ascott's learning strategies during the Groundcourse years? Can Role Play involving virtual selves, and indeed multiple virtual selves, bring forth behavioral change, which may open the floodgates of creative enablement? Can educators develop life long learning systems which '*start out with a disorienting dilemma and culminate into a changed perception of self*' (Mezirow, 1995) by integrating into their strategies the processes involved in the creation of alternative (virtual) states of being? Would the significance of creative output be likely to shift from 'object' to 'subject' as a result of such considerations?

CONCLUSION

A compelling outcome of creative activity in a synthetic world is the behavioral change "the created" effectuates upon "the creator." Yee and Bailenson have reported upon the relevance of the attributes of the three dimensional avatar, finding these to be significant predictors of a player's performance. However truly startling is also the finding that according to The Proteus Effect, not only does the appearance of the virtual body change how dyads interact with others in the online communities themselves; but this effect is indeed powerful enough to be carried through to subsequent face-to-face interactions amongst the physical handlers of the avatars participating in the experiment (Yee, Bailenson, 2009).

In "Exodus to the Virtual World" Castranova alerts his readers from the onset that the book is of a speculative nature. However, after this opening statement he continues on to list the scientific instruments with which he is constructing his model. Given the solidity of his assessment tools it would not be too imprudent to regard his predictions as anything other than informed deliberations, which it might behoove his readers to take into serious consideration: Even if his cogitations come to bear fruit only partially, humankind may find themselves living in a vastly altered world, or indeed in multiple worlds, "synthetic" and "real" simultaneously. While the impact of his predictions would be considerable in all aspects of human endeavor, the effects upon artistic activity may well be of enough moment to cause changes upon the fulcrum of the field itself; possibly even rendering the very nature of artwork itself as agent of inner change rather than externalized object.

This text has thus attempted to raise some of the issues related to a need for a restructuring of art educational curricula, particularly those practiced in metaverse environments at the present time. This examination has been positioned within the context of two pre-existent educational strategies which both raise compelling questions regarding the overall purpose of learning activity itself. These have also been associated with a brief examination of related material from Cyberanthropology and Cyberpsychology, as well as a personal observation of present day creative activity in the metaverse.

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