

GAMES: Virtual Worlds and Reality

Selected Papers of ISAGA 2008

Eugenijus Bagdonas & Irena Patasiene (eds.)

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The World, Your Playground; students at play in reconstructing reality

Maaïke de Jong

Abstract

How do students perceive, describe and construct reality, once they're invited to use it as their playground? Spring 2008, 85 students of Stenden University in The Netherlands took the course 'Imagineering'. During this course students are required to come up with a new experience for Disneyland, Paris. The term *Imagineering* was first coined by Disney, describing the process of both the imagining and engineering involved in creating experiences that theme parks like Disneyland are known for. The assignment involved the practice of both research and creative skills. Both were trained during this module. The focus in the research assignment is on creativity, creative techniques and the use of them to collect ideas and (help) shape this world.

The paper addresses the part of the research assignment called: 'the world, your playground'. This was a revision of an earlier assignment that invited students to (traditionally) write an essay about creativity. They now have to act their way into thinking about this subject. While students explore their own concepts of creativity and reality and the assumptions we have in dealing with everyday life, the author used their responses to analyze several philosophical stances in their perspectives. Inventories were made of the language and concepts students use to make sense of this world.

Several responses indicate that students tend to convert an epistemological question of demarcation – “what are the boundaries between the real and the virtual?” - into a normative position – “these boundaries should be kept clear!”. This provides insight into the way they perceive the discourse on real and virtual worlds. Also, students used the assignment for expressing their opinions about this world, rather than to examine their own assumptions. In a review of the assignment this will be taken into account, along with a moderation of the number of subject matters addressed in the assignment.

Keywords: philosophy of everyday life; playfulness; constructivism; BA - education, management.

Introduction: what a Martian needs to know

“It really looks like a meaningless fruit that adds nothing to nature. Nature is so complicated that humans, but especially Martians don't see the advantages of pine cones.”

“Above all, he should have no fear of flying and also, he will have to look outside. It is also important that the Martian knows what greetings are. Maybe they don't know how to say hello.”

Spring 2008, second year students Media & Entertainment Management performed a research assignment on creativity, called: “the world, your playground”. They wrote a brief literature study on creativity, management and research, applied their insights on the meaning of experiences and how they relate to reality, and translated these findings into their own creative expressions. The current discourse on the impact of virtual worlds on our 'everyday' lives (Castranova, 2007; McGonigal, 2006; Shirky, 2008) provides an interesting opening for reflection on 'real' worlds as well, inviting students to (learn to) question the things we (can) know about reality. The purpose of the assignment for this specific paper was to see what students would come up with, once they're invited to use the world as their playground.

The theme of creativity is key in this, as it provides an opening to both changing our perspective on reality as well intervening with it in a meaningful way (Delnooz, 2008; De Mul, 2002; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; McGonigal 2006; Wangh & Singhal; 2008). Though it may always be difficult to establish levels of (possible) intervention with certainty (Delnooz, 2008; Papa, Singhal & Papa; 2006) the notion of meaningful interventions is closely connected to the theme of agency and the construction of (social) reality (Delnooz, 2006, 2008). As philosophical themes, they can be considered worthy of Stenden's students' attention, aiming to become future managers in the media and entertainment industries.

One question in the assignment was: “If the person looking at a creation you made was a Martian, what would he or she have to know about this world, to be able to understand the idea presented?”

The quotes at the top of this page are exemplary reflections for the necessary make up of Martians to be able to deal with this world. The question itself was introduced as an epistemological metaphor to help students reflect on their assumptions about this world. It became a question on the ontological status of Martians. Apparently, we not only can have different, sometimes contradicting assumptions about this world, we can also have assumptions about the non-existing Martians that may not know our world. As one student wisely puts it: “of course, the Martian just represents people that may not understand what you do”. And so, we return to negotiate an understanding between ourselves and the world.

This paper presents a brief characteristic of students’ responses to the assignment. Section 1 sketches the development of the assignment; section 2 provides a general description of the data collected; section 3 discusses several recurring themes in the student’s responses based on a distinction along the axes of a) ‘reality as binding’ versus ‘transcendence of reality’ and b) innovation and creativity for intrinsic value (an aesthetic approach) or for extrinsic value (an instrumental approach). These axes provide four general stances adopted in relation to the theme of creativity, reality and expression. In the conclusion consequences for teaching are addressed.

The development of the assignment: a multimedial approach

Why would we - as teachers - want students to develop their skills in thinking about (their assumptions of) reality? The ability to innovate is highly valued in Dutch society, yet, according to some, underdeveloped. Creativity is essential in ‘the knowledge-society’, yet difficult to manage. Creativity and innovation are nonetheless connected. (Innovatieplatform, 2008). In education, the constructivist approach requires teachers to activate students to become problem solvers (Moust, 2002; Schmidt & Moust; 1998), while at the same time we’re dealing with ‘*Generation Einstein* that wishes to re-engage with society on their own terms (Boschma & Groen; 2004, Qrius, 2007) and with ‘*Homo Zappiens*’ that learns by doing, preferably in a playful manner and through communication, interpretation and negotiation (Veen & Vrakking, 2006)

In marketing, several techniques are taught for creative thinking, ranging from ‘basic’ creative techniques (Walravens, 1994) to ‘fancier’ or more disruptive approaches, such as Imagineering (The Imagineers, 1996; Nijs & Peters, 2002) and Disruption (Dru, 1996). Everyone seems to be on the lookout for a way out of “the box” at the same moment there appears to be a new quest for authenticity. Yet, the meaning of authenticity from a business perspective (Pine II & Gilmore; 2007) is quite different from the meaning of authenticity in authors such as Charles Taylor, who reinstated the theme on the philosophical agenda (1989, 1991).

As our BA students are not in training to become philosophers or scientists, yet would benefit from philosophical skills for analyzing the world around them, an assignment was developed to promote this kind of thinking, not so much by reading classic texts as well as interfering with this world. This way, a less ‘textocentric’ approach is taken (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006) and students may be invited to ‘act into thinking differently’ (Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2006, p. 240).¹

We needed to find a way to invite students to reflect on their notions of reality in a way that is appealing to them². Judging from the trends described above, it should invite them to actively create something, co-operate with one another and basically: *go out and play*. As Stenden University is a University of Applied Sciences, our students tend to be practically oriented. Reflecting on notions

¹ In these publications, a dialectic stance is adopted for the analysis of social change. These are addressed from the perspective of complexity science (Papa, Singhal & Papa; 2006). The notion of empowerment as discussed in these publications had not been incorporated into the assignment but will provide a framework for redeveloping these types of assignments throughout the curriculum inviting students to explore several dialectic tensions.

² A second purpose of the assignment is that it is part of the preparation for a PhD proposal. The author uses these assignments to further her own research into (the development of) a multimedial philosophical program on self-management, incorporating the Foucauldian notion of ‘aesthetics of existence’ (Foucault, 1984). The reports of this assignment serve as the determination of a starting level of our second year students. The goal of this preparatory research is not so much the determination of the effectiveness of this assignment (which would be broadening student’s perspectives on epistemological questions by inducing a sense of playfulness and stimulating creativity) but to come to a preliminary thematic understanding of their framing of (the discourse on) reality.

of knowledge and truth is generally not their idea of time well spent. However, checking what your assumptions are - can be practical in dealing with your future profession. Students have to develop a kind of agility in their thinking as agility and also playfulness in thinking lead to more creativity (Duke, Geurts & Vermeulen; 2007).

The theoretical framework of Imagineering rests partly on the notion of co-creation (Nijs & Peters, 2002; Pine & Gilmore; 1997). Resit students were therefore involved to gather ideas and co-design this assignment. From these ideas, a format was developed in a brainstorm session with two game developers. This was discussed with both a methodologist and game researcher, walked through with a befriended artist and in the end discussed with a small panel of third year students. The general goal of the assignment was to induce a sense of realisation in the way the world is constructed. In this sense, the assignment follows an action research approach: getting to know the world by intervening in it (Delnooz, 2008). One way to do so is by turning this world or the meaning of things in it upside down. In this way, Glynn & Webster's (1992) notion of playfulness and Salen & Zimmerman's idea of being playful (2004) are embedded in the assignment³.

Collection and description of the data: sharing their sense of beauty and concerns

In total, 85 students performed the assignment in groups, 40 couples, one threesome and two individuals. In total 43 assignments were handed in. Most assignments (N=31) were complete, containing a) a brief summary of the theory on creativity, b) a reflection on notions of experience, reality, fiction and virtual worlds, c) 5 examples of things they consider to be creative (concepts, designs, advertisements, works of art, illusions, experiences) and that turn things upside down (N=216). Students were invited to discuss the assumptions and expectations at play, d) then 3 examples of something they turned upside down themselves and e) a reflection on the assumptions about this world (the Martian part). The remainder of this paper discusses elements b) and e)⁴, some items under d) are used for illustration⁵.

The papers were analyzed through qualitative content analyses (Wester, Renckstorf & Scheepers; 2006). A random selection of 5 reports was taken for primary coding through close reading. Responses are analyzed and categorized along the axes of a) 'reality as binding' versus 'transcendence of reality' and b) innovation and creativity for intrinsic value (an aesthetic approach) or for extrinsic value (an instrumental approach). These axes generate four general stances, which for the purposes of this paper have been labelled escapist, moralist, hedonist and activist.

Table 1: Matrix for analyzing students' responses

		Intrinsic value (aesthetic)		
Binding (static)	reality	Escapist	Hedonist	Transcending (dynamic)
		Moralist	Activist	
		Extrinsic value (instrumental)		

³ In the assignment the notion of playfulness is used as a perspective to invite reflection on the assumptions one has about this world. Playfulness can be understood in a psychological sense, as "a propensity to define (or redefine) an activity in an imaginative, non serious or metaphoric manner so as to enhance intrinsic enjoyment, involvement and satisfaction" (Glynn & Webster, 1992, p. 85). Also, it can be understood in the ludological sense of 'being playful' as described by Salen & Zimmerman, that refers "not only to typical play activities, but also to the idea of being in a playful state of mind, where a spirit of play is injected into some other action" (2004; p. 303).

⁴ Most students echoed the theory about creativity. 3 couples explicitly contradicted the theory, based on their own opinions about creativity. These contained statements like: "in spite of what theory states, not all people are creative." These students displayed an artistic viewpoint on creativity.

⁵ Elements a) en c) will be discussed in another part of the full analysis of this assignment, in cooperation with a teacher in management skills for a) and an art-historian for semiotic analyses of section c) and d).

Escapism, moralism, hedonism, activism

Students' responses were analyzed along the lines of four major categories. Each of these motives is expressed 13 times or more throughout the different reports. These categories are addressed in the following sections.

An escapist motive: 'yet we'll have to go back'

20 descriptions of what constitutes an "experience", have escapist connotations, illustrated by formulations such as: "being in a different world for a moment", "being swept away for the day", "being away from the harsh real world", "being away from routine" and "to feel like a child again"⁶. Reality is considered 'binding' here, as these students, in their perspective on virtual worlds, claim that in the end you'll always have to return to the real world.

The virtual also seems connected to objects that can't be touched and that are an imitation of the real. Some frame the real and the virtual boundaries strictly in terms of sensory experiences, claiming the endless possibilities of virtual worlds: 'anything is possible there', and even:

"You can create the norms and values in such a way that they match a virtual world but not in the real world. In a virtual world, you can optimally let your fantasy go free".

Some claim to see the appeal of a fictional or virtual world in terms of: 'reality being worth escaping', 'a better world than reality', 'reality sometimes is hard, no wonder people want to escape into a fictitious world from time to time'. The escapist motive presents the notion that reality is worth fleeing from, even if you have to return in the end:

"This [virtual] world is not as it is in reality, though it often is better. In the virtual world, everything is possible, there's nothing that can't be done. But the biggest difference is that it is just not reality. You can run to these worlds, but in the end you'll always return to reality"

McGonigal (2006) describes this in terms of the 'optionality' that can be lacking from real life. Reality, in everyday language, is not about knowledgability, but about the things you have to 'deal' with. Descriptions such as these, match this notion. Her claim however, is that through augmented reality gaming and ubiquitous computing Castranova's expected 'exodus' to virtual worlds (2007) can be put to a halt, by making reality itself more appealing (McGonigal, 2006, 2008). The ultimate, yet probably difficult to measure, goal of this and future assignments, is connected to this line of reasoning.

Her viewpoint does however demonstrate the pervasive mediation of everyday life (cf. Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Students often display their concern for this pervasiveness in their description of reality. Yet, they generally frame the distinction between reality and virtuality along the lines of sensory perception. Some consider these distinctions to be clear:

"I think that at the moment you see or experience things that cannot be real, that you're in a fictive world. The real world exists of things that you can explain. Fictive things can be unexplainable."

"If we compare the real world to the fictitious world, the boundaries are with the things you can experience yourself. Anything you can touch and experience is real, on the other hand a made up story or a computer game is fictitious (the playing of it *is* real though)."

"If you experience something with the aid of technology, it can be fictitious. Without technology, it is absolutely reality. What you see and hear then really is what is happening."

Students' creative expressions were connected to computers and technology eleven times. Some of them display a concern for the convergence of our bodies with computer technology, stating also that communication between people appears to become less personal. The attitude towards these technological changes is however nuanced by more positive aspects such as the registration of donors with a chip in a person's body. This ambivalence is also displayed in the following quote and picture:

⁶ The focus on 'being away from reality' may in part be attributed to the section of questions in this part of the assignment, containing among others a question about the distinction between reality and fiction.

“Because human beings are getting more and more dependent on computers and different ways of storing information, I got the idea of providing my body with all kinds of computer elements and USB-stick and floppy-discs, etcetera and then to finally connect it to the electric system. This is displayed in this picture.”

Figure 1: concern for the convergence of the human body with technology



So, students encounter a tension in their statements, claiming that reality can only be known through sensory experience, whilst at the same time experiencing the pervasive mediation that shapes their interdependent connections with one another.

The escapist perspective is connected to an artistic notion of creativity, i.e. students describing the virtual world as a world with endless possibilities for creative imagination, tend to describe the creative process from a more expressive perspective:

“We associate creativity with being free to express ideas and to receive time and space to come to these ideas. [...] Creativity is developed when people are motivated to develop their creativity”.

This notion of creativity appears to be connected to an aesthetic perspective, i.e. the creativity may be liberating in that it provides an escape, yet is in not intended to promote something other than what it portrays in itself. In the moralist viewpoint the difference with a more instrumental stance will be illustrated, in part based on notions of aesthetics by Taylor (1989).

A moralist motive: you've got to keep them separated

Several students describe commercially designed experiences, as ‘unreal’, ‘not pure’ or ‘inauthentic’. Some refuse the consumerist perspective, recollecting the innocence of their childhood or pointing out the programmed safety and organized adventure of current day attractions. Students also state negative experiences - accidents, losing a loved one and being traumatized – should be taken into account in the range of human experience.

These descriptions of reality – though less extensively articulated – match Taylor’s notion of authenticity and moral frameworks (1989, 1991). They demonstrate a quest for authenticity, unknowingly validating this moral ideal. The experienced lack of freedom from time to time, demonstrates a sense of being bound by the frameworks they live in. Yet, this perspective is not escapist, as there appears to be a willingness to engage in these experiences, provided that there’s clarity on the boundaries between what we consider real and virtual: there can be no synergy between them.

Students that appear to speak from a motive of moral concern, display a sense of unease for the possible relativity of the boundaries between reality and virtual worlds. These students hang on to the moral necessity of this distinction. Some describe a situation in which they felt it was unclear to them what was real and what not. One might expect that this experienced vagueness would lead to a tolerant attitude towards the unclarity between the real and the virtual: ‘the boundaries are not as clear as we think’. Consider the following description of this uncertainty:

“Sometimes [while daydreaming] the distinction between fantasy and reality blurs strongly, being kind of creepy. I did not consider it annoying, but it was weird. Apparently, you can land in this border area between fantasy and fiction in which you don’t really know what side you’re on”

This was then followed by a moral appeal on sticking to the clarity of the distinction:

“People should always keep in mind that there is a (big) difference between fantasy and reality. As soon as you believe your fantasies can always become real, or you act in a way that you make them into reality, something’s wrong”.

Other students first reported: “Sometimes people are so involved [in virtual experiences] that the boundaries are blurry”, to continue with:

“Current games resemble reality a lot. We think it should be monitored when these line become too blurry. It cannot be the case that children don’t know the difference between real and fictitious.

The blurriness between the boundaries may cause a kind of (existential) unease that leads to a reinstatement of these boundaries, even if it’s hard to actually demarcate them. This indicates that perhaps they feel uncomfortable adequately addressing the issue: what can the consequences be for their worldview if they think this through? They resort to a normative notion of the boundaries of reality and fiction - people *should not* confuse the boundaries.

A hedonist motive: ooh, what does this button do?

The third motive is linked to the escapist notion, in terms of artistic expression. The difference however, is in the dimension of the possibility of transcendence of reality. These descriptions and expressions are not so much about escaping this world as well as redesigning it into a more playful place. These students seem less concerned with the impossibility of discerning the distinction, illustrated by a statement such as:

“We may think that a virtual online game is a virtual world and one would be inclined to think this totally takes place in a virtual world. But isn’t this the same as telebanking. Even at this moment we’re heading something virtual - a person - with our own brain. We think the virtual and the real world have become so entangled, that the question where the boundary is, has to remain unanswered for now.”

These students portray fun and optimism in some of their creations, describing the process in which their expressions came about as ‘fooling around in school’, ‘taking a stroll’, ‘spending a relaxed afternoon with friend’, ‘driving around the city to come up with ideas’. This matches the ‘hedonist’ section: creative expressions serve no specific function other than the fun and beauty they have intrinsically, reality is not considered binding.

Figure 2: Waiting for an open bridge would be more fun, had these prints been put on the asphalt.



Figure 3: Swinging under the bridge of Leeuwarden



These students tend to walk around to try to see the world with fresh eyes and redefine the functions of the things they see. Some students did not perform the assignment by trying to come up with

something creative themselves, but did include pictures of things they considered memorable or beautiful⁷.

An activist motive: let's see what we can do!

Students' concerns with the wellbeing of the world are addressed through the moralist and the activist motive. Both attempt to use their expressions and statements as an instrument for either conviction or change. In the responses labelled activist, these students display a frustration with the world as it. In some cases they present this with creative expressions aimed at problem solving or protest and an accompanying, elaborate, sometimes angry, explanation of their assumptions about this world. The students portraying pessimism about the state of affairs in this world came up with ideas to promote people's thinking.

Consider these two items:

Figure 7: "Disturb"



Figure 8: "Behind bars belong those people that 'eat' the souls of children".



These students state that they designed both items after hearing the news about the Austrian man that had held his daughter and her children hostage in cellar for years.

They wrote:

“It doesn't matter whether you turn on the television or read the newspaper these days. Everyday you hear of children missing or being abused. Even child prostitution is becoming more actual. In our view, it is necessary to open the eyes of people. The world literally is a 'playground'. A 'playground' for people that think they can do what they want to do without taking into account the losses other people suffer”

This couple also reported:

“Our assumptions about this world are that, no matter how bad and terrible it is, it is changeable. We think a Martian would think like this as well. He has to know not every human being is good, but that by the actions of other people, the world can be a better place.”

In these responses, the lack of clarity regarding the distinctions of reality and virtual worlds is met with optimism as well as a need to express their concern and intervene in a communicative manner.

⁷ From Taylor's philosophy, these responses would not take into account the affirming, epiphanic opening that art should provide, recognizing the permanent dialogue between artist and the community of interlocutors he stems from (1989). Should his framework be used for further elaboration, Taylor's critics should also be addressed providing ample room for the debate on postmodern theories as well (Geldof; 1997)

Conclusion: lessons learned for failing forward

This paper focussed on students' descriptions of the distinction between real and virtual worlds and their sense for creativity and originality: what happens when they are playfully invited to turn things upside down? A preliminary typology of motives underlying their thinking and creative expressions was presented. These descriptions will now inform the development and co-creation of new assignments, in which several of the topics students put forward will be elaborated. Amongst these themes, the mediation of everyday life will be addressed. The assignment will however have to be simplified, building on one or two philosophical themes instead of the whole gamut of concepts addressed in the module as a whole. Although the themes of authenticity and mediated experience appear to be alive in the students' minds, assignments on these themes may be built up over different moments in the course of the curriculum.

One question for teachers to address in this intended elaboration is whether it is part of growing up to realize the reality is not as fixed as might be comfortable. If so; how can education train students in - not so much distinguishing what is and what is not real – as well as dealing with the uncertainty that we may not be able to definitively and permanently define what is real. This does the, after all, link the epistemological theme with notions of morality, in a didactic sense. How to overcome the psychological discomfort of not knowing what to accept as real and turn this discomfort into something that may be empowering? This question will be addressed in future research and tested in future assignments.

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