Designing Art Exhibitions in an Educational Virtual World

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Imagine a layering of art exhibition experiences with each successive layer gaining
technological power, and partially revealing characteristics of the one below. As the
thesis advisor for Julian Glynn Crooks, a recent graduate in the Educational Media
concentration in the Department of Art + Design at the University of the Arts in
Philadelphia, a process of accretion of visual worlds in a three part palimpsest
relationship is surprisingly observed in her research project. Although every successive
experiential pass seemed to overlay the level beneath, each one contributes
synergistically and unmistakably to the whole.

Having adopted the Levels of Discourse in Aesthetic Inquiry as an appropriate visual
model to aid in understanding this phenomenon, it became readily apparent that the
primary source, the first layer of reference, can only be the studio art experience itself.
(Ecker & Kaelin, 1972) Here students imagine, design, and manipulate media to develop
a creative product.

Next, the art exhibition naturally evolves as the second layer in the stack, overlaying the
studio work with its own realities and functioning as its phenomenological critique. Even
if hung in an Internet gallery, the work has traditional gallery presence with the viewers'
gaze directed from outside of the exhibition space. Ultimately, the art works become a
player in a new composition, the exhibition design experience itself.

Yet, as the preceding studio and exhibition experiences are overwritten with the
possibility of increasing technological advances, the process gains strength. As
sub strata, still solidly in place, the preceding levels shine through and form the
foundation for the next third layer, student exhibitions in virtual worlds. Functioning as a
meta critique of earlier practice, those exhibits hosted in educational virtual worlds are
informed and energized by their two part foundation below.

Julian Glynn Crooks' research project provides important data on how designing exhibitions in the virtual world of Second Life can effectively address student driven learning and Net generation Learning Preferences. (Crooks, 2011)

Central to this effort, the Cerulean Gallery in the Educational Media Center in Second Life continues to provide an excellent showcase for designing art exhibitions in an educational virtual world. By examining the multiple features of the Cerulean Gallery and by viewing several exemplar exhibits by students, artists, and museums hosted there, the characteristics of this most recent virtual layer of the visual model become more evident.

Those exhibits themselves function as case studies which examine the effectiveness of the Educational Media Center in Second Life as an alternative venue for exhibition and aesthetic discourse in virtual worlds and to address the learning preferences of Net Generation learners and the needs of artists and curators for accessible exhibition space.

Located on a beautiful virtual tropical beach, The Educational Media Center features multiple modalities for teaching, learning and exhibiting art work. Four major exhibits held at the Center in the past two years: *Places of the Heart*, an intergenerational theme show, *Wish You Were Here*, a collaboration with Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Center in the Western Isles, UK, *The Anime Show*, a high school art club in Philadelphia, and the most recent exhibit, *The Photographs of Lady Clementina Hawarden* on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A List of Works and Press Releases are available in the virtual space for visitors to pick up and read at their leisure. There is a large flat screen TV in the gallery that documents the opening receptions and the adjacent Power Point screen has been used for group critiques of the shows. In extending the traditional idea of exhibition venues, other available resources in the Cerulean Gallery include a lending library with downloadable

professional literature, a computer station, indoor and seaside conference facilities, a

building platform, a playable piano, snack bar and swimming pool.

The Net Generation is the cohort born between the years 1984 and 2004. Digital

technologies have significantly influenced this group, shaping many of their behaviors,

attitudes and learning preferences. From a review of contemporary literature on the topic,

six areas have been identified in which the Net Generation is distinct with respect to the

following learning preferences: Social Connectivity, Identity Play, Participatory

Creativity, Attention Issues, Visual Preference, and Inductive Approach. As part of the

digital qualitative research design, these six areas have been embedded as observation

benchmarks in three exhibitions in the Cerulean Gallery. (Crooks, 2011)

Figure 1. The Ed Media Center in Second Life

The Educational Media Center in Second Life serves several purposes in addition to

providing an exhibition space and virtual meeting area. It also provides the opportunity

for pre-service art educators in the Art + Design Department to explore the potential of virtual worlds for their own educational projects. Additionally, it provides a professional development resource for art educators interested in using the Second Life platform to enhance the learning experience of their own Net Generation students. (Crooks, 2011)

In contrast to 2-D Web exhibitions, the Cerulean Gallery creates a sense of presence as well as offering opportunities to display art, to share aesthetic experience, to collaborate with others, and to connect over geographic distance. Additionally, the art works are scaled to their actual size, both in proportion to other pieces and to the figures of the avatar visitors. The textures of the pieces are photorealistic, allowing the viewers to see

the work as it appears in real life when they zoom in. Each piece is labeled with information about the artist and the work. Viewers can virtually move through the gallery, pick up an artist statement, stop and look at pieces, sit upon gallery furniture and discuss the works In this virtual space, they can share the work with others who, though geographically distant, appear to occupy the same virtual room, looking at the same art, at the same time. (Crooks, 2011)

Wish You Were Here was the first exhibit to be held in the Cerulean Gallery. It grew out of a physical visit to the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Center in North Uist, Western Isles, UK. Demonstrating all three levels of the palimpsest model, the collaboration involved actual student art done by Scottish students and by graduate Art + Design Education students at the University of the Arts.

Figure 2. The Cerulean Gallery in Second Life

The project's next iterative layer was an Internet exhibit of the digitized images, which also included text comments generated over time from both student groups. In an interesting backwards twist, actual digital prints from the Internet show were exhibited in the President's gallery at the University of the Arts.

For the third stage, the *Wish You Were Here* exhibit was hung in the Cerulean Gallery in Second Life for several months duration, where it was visited by numerous student groups, as well as by art and design education faculty from various universities. Audience response did testify to the power of the original actual art work to communicate diverse and sensitive senses of place even through the 3-D Web interface of Second Life.

As the first show in the Cerulean Gallery, there were indeed technical skills to learn and hurdles to overcome. For example, each piece needed to be properly scaled. In the case of the University President's show, the physical constraints of the actual exhibition space

dictated that the original size of each piece be modified in the digital print. Some of the pieces were very large, some quite small, but the reproductions were all the same size in that show. In the virtual world these limitations were absent. It was possible to assure that each piece could be the same size, relative to an avatar, as its original would be to a person. It seemed important to maintain this integrity for a true experience of co-presence. Interactive signs were created that, when touched, would deliver a press release about the show and a list of works. (Crooks, 2011)

As a meta critque of *Wish You Were Here*, the second exhibit, *Places of the Heart,* overwrote both the physical and Blog iterations of that initial event, as it was designed exclusively for the virtual space of the Cerulean Gallery. A call for participation was posted on the International Art Education Association (InAEA) website and instructions were given on participation logistics. As a point of departure for their creative process, artists were directed to view Gerhard Richter's altered postcard paintings of place. International participation included both students and faculty in Art + Design Education.

Parallel to the purely virtual exhibition design intention of *Places of the Heart*, the next exhibit in the Cerulean Gallery was *The Anime Club* by students at Kensington Culinary Art High School in Philadelphia. Their art teacher, another MA candidate in the Art + Design Education Department at the University of the Arts, scanned the actual student work for the show from their first layer of studio involvement in the project, into their second level of exhibition experience.

The pieces were delivered on a CD and then individually altered to adapt to the Cerulean Gallery. To maximize their graphic impact, they were enlarged and the lines were darkened in Photoshop to make them more visible in the virtual world. According to their art teacher, the experience had a very positive effect on the participants' self esteem. The students reported back on questionnaires that seeing their work in the virtual gallery made them feel like real artists. The research findings from each student exhibition event

supported one or more of the learning preference benchmarks of Net Generation students:
Social Connectivity, Identity Play, Participatory Creativity, Attention Level, Visual
Preference or Inductive Approach. (Crooks, 2011)

The current exhibit at the time of this writing, *The Photographs of Lady Clementina
Hawarden* is on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Adding another layer of
exhibition design to the initial one in the actual museum galleries in London, the idea for
the virtual exhibit came from a face to face meeting at the 2011 Museums and the Web
international conference in Philadelphia. The images were emailed and manipulated to fit
the gallery walls, maintaining the apparent proportions of the original 19th century prints.
The virtual show provides opportunities to view the work, to download information about
the artist, and an interface that links the viewer to the museum's website.

All four of the exhibits to date, are electronically archived in both machinima and digital
image formats in the Educational Media Center Library in Second Life.

While these four virtual exhibition exemplars provide insights into designing virtual
exhibitions in an educational virtual world, the adventures of the Cerulean Gallery
directors, Jules McWinnie aka Julian Crooks, and Junie Mirabella aka June Julian, have
just begun. You are cordially invited to add your own layer of meaning to our gallery
history by proposing an exhibit. For more information, please see our machinima on
YouTube, *Creating Exhibitions in Virtual Worlds*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oj5W1fuVx74

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Designing Art Exhibitions in an Educational Virtual World
2011 International Journal of Art & Design Conference

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