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It's Hard Fun: Reflecting on Identity in the Educational Game 'The European House' - Workshop

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Abstract

This paper is based on a workshop presentation based on the European educational project Multiple Choice Identity. In this young people from 3 till 25 years learn to develop their own identity in Europe. Our aim is to make contact from different perspectives through knowledge, images, interactivities, creativity, norms and values and music. Gaming and especially educational gaming is a special opportunity and challenge to reach young people in their own world and to prepare them for the future. Multiple choice identity is an open, knowledge based, problem-solving, communicative, active, creative and reflective identity or person and he feels at home in the virtual world. In a virtual world they may experiment with this.

> We, and especially young people are living in a network society. Education should teach them to live in the future in this globalised, democratic, communicative and multiple reality. It should be done in the past of the future. This is the first generation born with a mouse in their hands and a computer screen as their window on the world (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003).

Young people like the new technology such as the internet, SMS, email, gaming and 'hyving' and iPod. They've learned to walk through reality on their fingertips and for some the physical world is 'just another window' (Veen, 2005). The real and virtual worlds are intermingled. It is the task of educators 'to learn how learners are learning to learn'(Veen, 2005). Welcome the 'homo zappiens', using tools as the new media, interactivity, information, images, mobile communication and 'Multi User Role Playing Games'.

In the European educational project 'Multiple Choice Identity' we are learning young people from 3 till 25 years to develop an own identity in Europe. It's our aim to make contact from different perspectives through knowledge, images, interactivities, creativity, norms and values and music. Gaming and especially educational gaming is a special opportunity and challenge to reach young people in their own world and to prepare them for the future. The 'multiple choice identity' is an open, knowledge based, problem-solving, communicative, active, creative and reflective identity or person and he feels at home in the virtual world. In a virtual world they may experiment with that and that's why we started to design the educational game 'The European House' in 2006 and we will work on it until 2009. The name 'European House' is inspired by Michael Gorbachov who describes Europe as a home where all kinds of people could live safely and happily together.

'The European House' is developed in cooperation with Active worlds, L3D, the ICT-school and the School of Education of the Hanze University. In the MCI-project the first theme 'Identity' consists of the game 'The European House' with other non-digital elements.

Next to the game there's space for the teacher to give an introduction, instruction and knowledge and to organise a circle talk and reflection.

'It's all in the game'

Traditional education is changing due to the current variations on the nature of young people, the economy, the social structures and the globalization process. Old educational methods such as presence lessons, lectures and conferences, are getting obsolete. Non-traditional students need and demand a constructive educational system adapted to their exigencies and schedules. There are different types of distance education, and each of them is appropriated for students with particular conveniences. Therefore, e-learning facilitates educational possibilities for everyone who wants to study.

Some of the most important differences between e-learning and traditional learning are as follows.

Traditional education	E-learning
Compulsory assistance to the classroom for the learners	Learning online
No need of ICT or new technologies	Use of ICT and new technologies required
Teachers and students share the classroom	Teachers are physically separated from the student
One way communication addresses from the teacher to the student	Connected communication among all the students and tutors
Lectures	Feedbacks
Teacher	Tutor
The information has to be memorised.	The information has to be synthesized
Cognitive	Constructive
Contents are equal for all the students	Learning individualization
One main way of learning	Respect diverse ways of learning

Working with the virtual student requires new methods of teaching. Successful learners in the online environment need to be active and creative in the learning process. They have to be responsible and committed to their work. So, the role of the tutor within its process is awkward. The tutor has to make attractive materials for students and he has to encourage them to complete the established tasks.

Marc Prensky called new generations "digital natives" and old generations "digital immigrants". He came up with a deep research about the changes in personality that new technology is causing in young people. He found out that their behaviour and way of perceiving is different so that the way education is being addressed to them should change. They process information in a complete different way as digital immigrants.

"Different kinds of experiences lead to different brain structures, "says Dr. Bruce D. Berry of Baylor College of Medicine. Even so, affirming that our students' brains have physically changed is too much, we can truly state that their thinking patterns have altered.

Howard Gardner once said to me that ict is a necessary tool to use multiple intelligences in an optimal way. According to the MCI-project it's the right tool for young people to develop a 'multiple choice identity'. Our experience is that not only the environment is changing but also the use of the learning styles and the didactics. In the virtual world learning is more interactive, flexible and speedy. In an educational game tasks may be done and experienced in a way that's not possible in a book or an outdoor activity. Another option is 'blended learning', a didactical mix of the real and the virtual world. Learning with digital and non-digital sources of information and material makes an educational game stronger and more effective. The transfer from the virtual world to reality can be made. A boy from 12 years said: *'Mister Kratsborn you are doing your best, but you will never learn gaming on a high level'.*

What's the surplus value of an educational game?

The game is an effective learning environment, because it's a challenge to solve complex problems through 'trial and error'. The play is inside the story and helps the player to get into 'the flow'. For example the player may become an actor in the Golden Age or during the Christianisation of the Germanic tribes. Together with the merchant or the missionary he has to find the right strategy. He's involved and that's why he wants to play for hours. He learns a lot step by step in a challenging and pleasant way. It's hard fun.

Another surplus value is that the learner may try out alternative routes or actions. His decision in integrated in the follow-up of the game and that makes him feel respected and proud.

It's clear to him what he has achieved and what he has to do.

It's also an identification with different characters and situations and he may change roles easily and quickly. For example he may choose playing different roles in the Second World War as a perpetrator, a collaborator, a viewer, an opponent or a victim. The virtual environment is constantly changing, because he looks at it from different perspectives.

In the games he comes as close as possible. It's a concrete and direct contact and music can also assist to realize that. .

What learning and living styles are appropriate?

In a game a learning and a life-style are very close, because of the speed and the directness. An activity is immediately followed by a reaction. While designing the game we also experience that the impact of learning styles and didactics are different in a virtual environment. It's a consequence of constructivist learning as activity. On the

other hand it's necessary to give the right knowledge at the right moment, and that's an instructivist and also a constructivist learning style. Sometimes it's ok and appropriate that the teacher gives information and/or instruction, checks the tasks and the products and reflects together with the learners on the game. It's 'just-in-time learning and teaching', because the teaching-process is synchronised with the learning-process.

Another important learning style in gaming is 'situated learning' or 'contextual learning', as a stimulus to put things in an authentic context. For example mobile gaming is a useful option.

By mobile phone the learner asks another person at another place to take a picture or to do research. A learner from Lisbon may ask a learner from Amsterdam to take pictures of the remnants of the Second World War in Amsterdam. The learner from Amsterdam may ask the learner from Lisbon for images and information about the time of the discoveries in Portugal. This is 'blended learning' in optima forma.

Young people want to communicate ('communities', Hyves, profile-sites or social-networking sites) and collaborative learning is a way of social interaction.

In the educational game 'The European House' the living style of the net-generation is influenced through 'ubiquitous learning', always and everywhere. It's a mix of online and face to face identity, a meeting point in a virtual and the real context. Multi-tasking and twitch speed and non-linear thinking are activated by just-in-time learning. The network-society is not a linear story but a network in which everything is connected with linear, cyclical and chaotic processes. The game is a guide that's leads the learner through this complex world. For young people it's also getting harder to follow whole stories or sequences and that's why we should help them step by step.

So that's why constructivist, situated and multiple intelligent learning fits in a multiple society to construct a 'multiple choice identity'. Education should react on the instant and 'shopping' attitude of young people.

Howard Gardner describes a balanced living style for the future, in his latest book about five minds for the future (Gardner, 2007). These are five ways to find an own route in the future, an own life-style. The disciplined mind is about the specific thinking as a historian, a mathematician, a scientist or an artist. The synthesizing mind links all kind of things together and fits very well in the multiple network-society, in which everything is linked to everything.
The third mind is the creative mind that likes to solve problems. The respectful mind is about respecting the other and the ethical mind about a good system of norms and values. These five minds are integrated and activated in the game 'The European House'. Education and especially educational gaming should give space, instruction and content to experiment with multiple identities, social behaviour and other personalities and it's all in the game.

'The European House'

Let's start to play the game 'The European House', following the avatar as a representation of the self, when he takes a look around five houses or countries, situated in the corners of the virtual environment. In the North-West is the Dutch and the Danish House, in the North-East the Latvian House, in the South-West the Portuguese House and in the South-East the Slovenian House. 'The House' is a metaphor for the identity in that specific country in the present.

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│ Dutch      │   │ Danish     │              │ House      │
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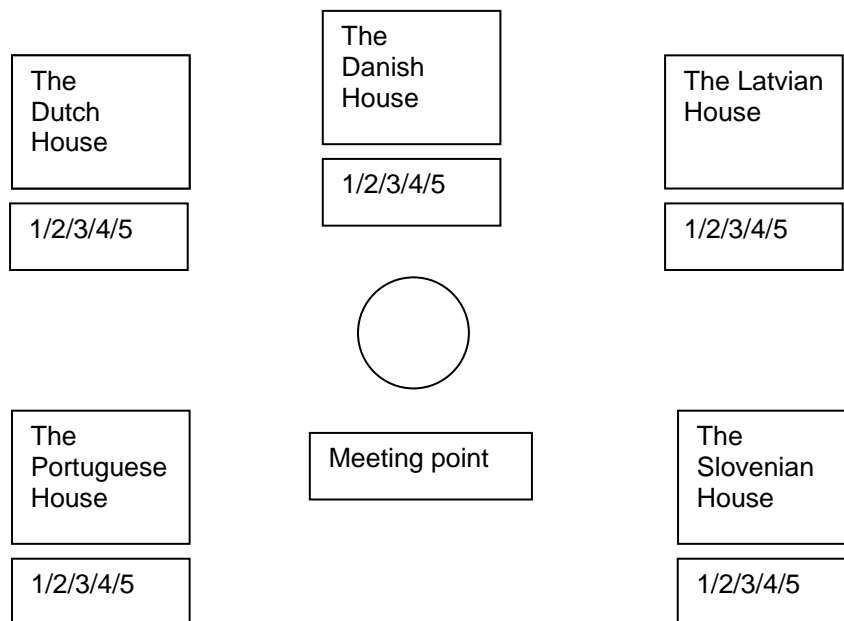
The virtual environment of 'The European House'

Before he's allowed to go into a house, the avatar has to do know and internalize interactively five key-terms about historical items in that country. Otherwise he cannot understand what's going on in the house. For example the Portuguese identity is still influenced by the discoveries and fascism, the Danish identity by the Viking period and the Latvian identity by the domination of the Russians. After internalising the five key-terms he gets five coloured keys to open the door of the house. In this way history is the fundament or basement of the house.

The selection and the content of the key-terms are done in cooperation with historians from the countries. So this is a real European game from different perspectives. For example, the Renaissance or the Second World War mean something completely different in the five countries.

The key-terms are different in the five countries. Christianisation in the Netherlands happened in the 7th century or the Viking Age in the 9th century in Denmark. The Golden Age of Portugal is the 16th century and in the Netherlands the 17th century.

Some countries are still waiting for a golden age. The First and the Second World War are key-terms in all the countries. In each of the historical items the avatar has to do different activities such as solving a problem (helping Bonifatius to baptise the pagans), combining an event and a person (William of Orange and the riot), collecting objects or writing a letter (the collaborator during the Second World War). In the last paragraph I will focus on the key-term 'The First World War', related to the Dutch House as a concrete example.
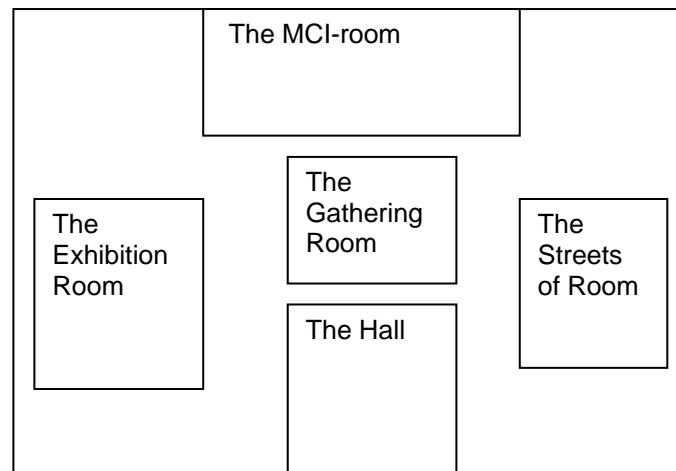
So after doing the tasks according to the five key-terms or historical items the avatar gets the five keys to open the door and to enter the house. The teacher may check here if the avatar has done his tasks correctly. Maybe he asks him to gather more knowledge. This is 'blended learning' because it happens in the real classroom.

Maybe the avatar has to go back to a certain item to improve his level. The teacher can follow the avatar because all the activities in the game are traceable are checkable.

Now the avatar is permitted to enter a house. He's obliged to visit his own house first, because that's his home, his own identity.

Each house is divided in five rooms: 'the Hall', 'the Exhibition-room', 'the Gathering-room', 'the Streets-of-room' and 'the MCI-room'. After doing the tasks in the five rooms he may leave the house through the backdoor.

When the avatar enters 'the Hall' he has to write down his profile, look at a photo-collage and listens to music about the identity of this house/country. His active task is to write subtitles under the images. He may find 'the box of knowledge' with basic information about the identity of that country. Each side of the box is another entry point such as the narrative, the logical-quantative, the existential, the aesthetical and the experiental entry point. So 'the Hall' is the meeting-point in the present between the self and the other. The next room is 'The Exhibition', designed by inhabitants of that house, consisting of a flag, objects, paintings, music, images, sculptures or words. The content of the exhibition is related to history and especially the period after the Second World War, but also to the present and the future. The avatar has to be interactive designing his own exhibition about the identity in that house, using his own identity and flag. It's possible to use 'blended learning' and to go on the internet for background-information or to go to the library for books or other material.

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The House

While walking in 'the Exhibition Room' the avatar has to fill out the 'Feedback ladder'.

What does he value? What doesn't he understand? What he's worried about? What are his suggestions? This is also a good moment for the teacher to check the process, the quality of information and the product of the avatar. In the class a circle talk may be organised about the exhibition, the avatar's exhibition and the feedback-ladder. The avatar may also talk about this with another avatar in the next room 'The Gathering-room'.

In 'The Gathering-room' the avatar and another avatar are confronted with a problem that has to be solved for example about migration, unemployment, criminality, the future or the multi-cultural society. Maybe some other avatar has put a question on the wall by post-it memos. The avatar himself may put his unanswered questions on the wall to be answered by other avatars in the future.

In 'The Gathering-room' a family is sitting around a table, consisting of a father, a mother, a sister, a brother, a friend and a grandmother. 'The Table talk' is going on and the members of the family are instruments. They speak to each other in music, 'talking in titles'. The father is the drum, the mother the synthesizer, the sister the violin, the brother the guitar, the friend the sitar and the grandmother the piano. There's a problem in the family and the avatar has to find out what's going on. He has to solve the problem with the help of another avatar. He may also do a role-play outside of the virtual environment with other learners. Beforehand they may talk to each other in order to find out what the problem is and what kind of relations are existing in the family. It's always amazing what comes out of 'The Table Talk' with the different age-groups.

The next room is called 'The Streets of', the opening of the window to reality. The avatar is making contact with his mobile phone to a young person in the outside world, asking him to do something for him such as taking pictures or do research in the streets of that city (about a sculpture, a building, a place or a museum).

Another possibility is to go to 'Google Earth' or to the site of a museum. The tasks may be about the present, the period after the Second World War or about a remnant from history (a place of remembrance of the Cold War or an event of Liberation). This is 'blended learning' in optima forma. Meanwhile the avatar may get hints on his mobile phone what he has to search for. He also may go in the streets of his own city himself to take pictures or to do research.

Finally the avatar arrives in the "MCI-Room' to visualize and audiolize his multiple choice identity in a clip of three minutes. In the middle of the screen his own person is situated in a bubble and he has to decide what he may pull inside. This is 'situated learning'. Starting in his own house he may work house after house and integrate new elements in his clip. Maybe he uses two elements from the Latvian House and none of the Slovenian one. It's up to him. He may choose his own music including his own rhythm or heartbeat.

For inspiration he may look at the official MCI-clip 'The bubble' (designed by Wim Kratsborn and Hilde Kuizenga) as a source of inspiration. In this clip a young person is communicating in a bubble with other young people in bubbles. Through the MCI-project the bubble is opened and the multiple choice identity may be developed. The five minds for the future are activated.

Another option (for the age-group 12-25) is to look at a video in which Howard Gardner explains the five minds for the future.

At the end of the game the avatar downloads his MCI-clip to show it to other avatars and he may put it in 'The Hall' of his own house.
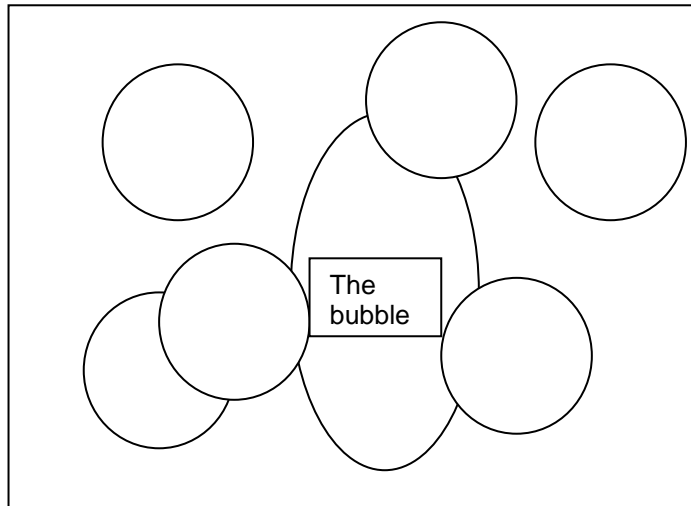
The screen of the MCI-clip

A concrete example: The First World War

In each historical item and house, we've tried to integrate the surplus value of educational gaming such as the appropriate learning styles and didactics, multiple intelligences, 'blended learning' and 'the five minds for the future'. Let's focus on the First World War, a historical item of 'the Dutch House'.

At the start the avatar receives a letter and a picture from a soldier (his uncle) who's fighting in a trench during the First World War. He wants to know what's going on and the avatar has to find out. The avatar gets involved but in a way he's not. In this way he experiences the neutrality of the Netherlands during the First World War. Through he song 'Thunder without frequencies' he feels the war and the dramatic situation in the trenches. The song is about a German nurse Gertrud, who was killed helping a soldier in the trench. In this song I tried, together with Anneke, Frank and Renée from the Gathering, to audiolize the crazy historical situation. I've composed the song during my visit at the graveyards in Ieper in Belgium.

This is about the respectful mind, using the intrapersonal and musical intelligence.

In the next scene the soldier phones the avatar and asks him some specific questions about his personal situation. Why are so many soldiers killed? He asks the avatar to do research. The source of inspiration is a photo-collage with music from Sigur Ros and images of the trenches.

Here he may use hyperlinks to find basic knowledge about the First World War. The disciplined mind and the synthesizing mind are activated as well as the verbal-linguistic and spatial-visual and the interpersonal intelligence.

In scene 3 the soldier asks about the situation of the avatar in the Netherlands. What are they doing there? Are they really trying to help? The avatar feels responsible for the Dutch neutrality and has to legitimise it. Poems, written by Dutch poets, songs and images are used.
The ethical mind is at hand as well as the intrapersonal, the verbal-linguistic, musical rhythmic and the logical-mathematical intelligence. This is good practice of 'blended learning' because the avatar has to find remnants and proves for the Dutch neutrality in reality.

The circumstances are getting worse for the soldier. During an attack he has lost everything and the avatar has to find out what the soldier needs to survive. The creative mind has to be used with the interpersonal and spatial-visual intelligences. The avatar has to make a survival-package for the soldier. He's interactively involved in the First World War and has to construct a solution for a problem.

Finally the war is over and the soldier is going home, sending his last letter with some authentic songs.

The avatar has experienced the First World War as the 'Music War' in an aesthetical and interactive way. He had to make choices in difficult and complex circumstances.

Finally he has to go and look after the remnants of the First World War in the Netherlands and in Belgium ('blended learning'). Later he may talk about this experience with another avatar in the 'Gathering room' or use his experience in the MCI-clip. In this way the First World War becomes a deep experience, integrating the context, the concrete historical situation and the personal tragedy of a soldier.

It's lifelong learning, linking a historical event to the own identity and to the present situation in Iraq. The avatar uses 'parallel identities' in the virtual and the real world, in the past and the present. Young people like to be informed through images, music and hyperlinks and it's all in the game 'The European House'. He's interactive, putting things in a context, communicating with another avatar and the self, experiencing the complexity of reality and integrating it in the own 'multiple choice identity'. This educational game is a way to develop an own identity in diversity and in dialogue.

Although educational gaming is a good way of learning, there are also some problems in the virtual environment that have to be solved.

These are some questions:
1) What's the guarantee that the learner gets sufficient basic information?
2) How may the learner be stimulated to really think 'out of the box' and meet the other in a respectful way?
3) What's the balance between digital and non-digital learning? When and how should 'blended learning' be activated?
4) What's the role of the teacher as instructor of knowledge and controller of the learning process? During what step should the teacher become active?
5) Is multi-tasking another word for surface knowledge?

Albert Camus wrote 'It's hard to become who you are'. It's hard fun.

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