Report:

I was awarded a technology grant spring semester 2007 to integrate the Otis Library portfolio program into my spring semester Studio Visits Class.

The Studio Visits class is offered to sophomores in the Digital Media Program. The class focuses on careers in the entertainment industries and tools that will assist students in gaining meaningful employment. The class introduces the different types of careers through visits to over 20 professional studios during the course of the semester. The tools developed during the class are a professional looking resume, cards and letterhead, interviews with leaders in the field, researching of media companies, and the creation of a professional looking reel to use in obtaining an internship or employment.

I have noticed over the last two years that in addition to the reels more companies were starting to view websites as a method of seeing a prospective employee’s body of work. So it was not unusual for a studio dept head to e-mail other players to look at a web site instead of calling a meeting to review a reel. In the industry this saves both time and money.

The building of a website by students is becoming more essential in today’s working environment. This is where the portfolio program stepped into the spotlight. Both my classes were required to do websites. The students found these positive features using the program.

1. The introduction of the portfolio program was very easy…the program is template driven and very easy for the student to learn and setup.
2. It gives each student a site that will represent them to the world, that is flexible in terms of change and growth. Each of my students will have a site by the end of there sophomore year that can change and grow as they do.
3. It really motivated students to create and finish work in other classes so they had work to show on their site.
4. This site is free to the student and will remain so after they complete their education here at Otis.
5. It gives everyone of my students an invaluable tool for their career early in their educational experience that allows them to show their work to the world.
Several of my students presented their work to the Academic Assembly on April 25 2007 at the end of the meeting. It was a twenty-minute presentation presented in 10 minutes. At the end of most of these meetings people are up and headed for the doors. In this case although the meeting had ended, they sat mesmerized by what they were seeing of the screen. I believe after that after this presentation of the excellent student web sites created with the portfolio program many instructors will now include building a web presence will be come part of their curriculum.

Portfolios of other Digital Media Students are available through O-Space Spots (http://ospace.otis.edu/portfolio/directory.digi).

--Michael Wright (/faculty/michael-wright)
Digital Media

Image from the Portfolio of Nick Escasany (http://ospace.otis.edu/bigescy/Home)

Image from the Portfolio of Chris Barischoff (http://ospace.otis.edu/Chris/Home)

Image from the Portfolio of Moni Harrion (http://ospace.otis.edu/moni/Home)
Michael Wright: 2007 TLC Technology Grant Report - Virtual World Project

Report:

In the Fall 07 semester, I took three classes of Otis digital sophomore students into the virtual world of "Second Life" where they developed and created content based on a class-developed theme. A Technology Grant from the College and further funding from M. Ragsdale Wright Studios supported the project.

My personal process… getting up to speed.

Sue Maberry, Otis College’s Director of Instructional Technology, introduced me to Second Life with the idea of developing classes in world. I do present the concept of virtual reality in my LAS class "Concepts and Issues in New Media" but was not aware of Second Life at the time. Therefore, in Oct 2006, I set up an account and jumped in to this strange place where you could teleport, fly, and be who and whatever you wanted to be. I spent most of a weekend stumbling around and came back not knowing how one would do a class in this environment. Nevertheless, I was fascinated with this virtual world being that it seemed to way beyond "MySpace" and "Facebook". It is actually more a combination of say Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, but with real-time social interaction. I could see the potential but didn’t know how to go about using it.
There are many classes in Second Life that help one get up to speed. I choose another route. I approached it more like how I approach software. I jump right in and use it before I look at a users manual. So I didn’t stay on Info Island long but plugged in places in the search area of my browser and went exploring. On the way and over time, I met avatars that gave me things to use and taught me how to do things like building, keyboard shortcuts, and told me about cool places to go. In my case, for the kind of experience I desired, I felt that to get up to speed quickly would require total emersion and the spending of money. I also found that I was working with people from all over the globe. So, from Oct 2006 to the beginning of fall semester 2007, with the support of the college and specifically the Library/Teaching Learning Center (i.e. Sue and Shelly Forbes), I put together a team of builders from the UK and Europe. I acquired land, and established several galleries where I placed my work, participated in several in-world art events, and gathered the knowledge to put together a class project.

Otis acquired an island (16 sq miles of virtual land) in the early summer 2007. By August I was savvy enough to make Second Life the focus of my artist residency at SIGGRAPH 07 in San Diego where we officially opened the Otis Island to the public. I also delivered a talk, “Art and Art Education in Virtual Worlds.” Even though I had yet to run a class project in Second Life, I did unveil my plans and the process that I would use to move forward at that SIGGRAPH presentation.

In September, I began the project in my three sections of "Concept and Issues." I was assisted in this project by Shelly Forbes (aka Porterhouse Dobbs), Library staff and master builder in Second Life. I could not have pulled off this project without her support, help and friendship.

The project…

The project was to develop and create content for an environment based on a class-developed theme on the Otis Island in Second Life. The project required students to use team building, out-of-the-box creative thinking, 3D and 2D virtual tools as well as to work with a budget (3000 lindens per class), and with a limited amount of building blocks (3100 primitives per class). Each team/class proceeded to develop a production pipeline and a theme for their area. Three hours of in-class time and ten hours of outside of class time were devoted to this project. None of the 55 students had previous Second Life experience.

They were required to learn the Second Life software to engage in the process and then to create and design their own personal avatar. After creating the avatar, each had to manage to get to Otis Island at an assigned time. At the island they were given brief introductions to movement, flying and building. The production pipeline began with brainstorming sessions. Once the themes were established the teams went to work creating content for their individual areas. The themes developed were "Heaven and Hell," "Pirates and Atlantis," and "Lost World and Mythology."

Student evaluations…
At the end of the semester I asked the students to evaluate the experience both good and bad. The positive comments far outweighed the negative.

On the positive side the students found working in teams on a group project a great icebreaker in getting to know one another. They enjoyed the social interaction from the class brainstorming to learning to work with each other as avatars in world. Deeper friendships were developed and a joy of seeing what each one would come up with in a creative manner. This project could not have been successful without the social interaction and teamwork.

Students enjoyed having control of their environment and loved the idea that changes would have happened when they logged on. Most students responded to introduction of new concepts. The feeling of being a pioneer and working in a cutting edge technology excited many. A number of students discovered they liked working in a 3D virtual environment and will take more classes in that area. Students who were familiar with programs such as Maya and Lightwave felt that Second Life was a good introduction to 3D modeling. It was not as complex as a full-on modeling program, yet introduced the use and concept of the x, y, and z-axes as well as working with primitives.

Many of the students felt the project provided a template of an industry project. They were excited by the blending of real life through brainstorming and sketching with the virtual technology that allowed them to customize their environment and avatars and bring their ideas to life for all to see. The project pushed students to be inventive while working within the limitations of the environment. They loved the experience of success and felt that they would be able to handle anything the digital curriculum would throw at them in the future.

A number of students found the research of interest, feeling that they were putting their art history classes to work. Several noted that they responded to the synergy between themselves and the staff administrators. Shelly Forbes, in particular, was of great help to many who had questions about building and scripting.

Some students, who took the time to explore Second Life by visiting other regions and exploring other places, could not stop talking about what they found in-world. They were inspired.

On the negative side, many students were frustrated by the lack of Internet speed especially at the college. The largest complaint was the lag time, caching and the time it took to log back on. Some found the newness of the experience a bit overwhelming. The constant updating of the program was a pain to many. There were at least four updates of the software during the semester. Many could not work at home due to the lack of up-to-date equipment and Internet speed at home. The gamers of the classes hated the look of environment and the movement of the avatars, feeling that the game engine was outdated. Some came around when they realized Second Life is not a game. Some did not give it a chance.
Lastly, one class ran into copyright issues. The class started to do a Mario Bros. environment and had to shut it down about third of the way into the creation when they were informed that they could not do it without violating copyright. This was a double-edged sword. It really took the wind out of their sails. But on the other hand, as we cover copyright in the class extensively, they had a first-hand experience with the issue.

Some student comments…

"I was given an opportunity to experience communication in a completely different way that I’m used too. I used to always be afraid of learning anything that had to do with 3-d, but I realized that I have a pretty good sense of space and direction. This has largely to do with the fact that I’ve been playing video games my whole life. This time around I was able to interact
more deeply with my environment, which sparked an interest in environmental design. If I decide to pursue 3-d design, then Second Life will have been one of my influences." - Cliff Childs

"We learned the importance of communication, teamwork and an introduction to 3D space and building tools. I felt that this project has made me realize that teamwork is what takes you to succeed and that everyone needs to communicate to make things work." - Lizbeth Martinon

"My favorite part of this project was being able to come onto Otis Island randomly and always find something new about our section. Through this project I learned that the production pipeline really does flow through all forms of work, large or small. I also learned that when the pipeline is not exactly the model you follow to get your work done, or parts of the pipeline fall behind, the entire project suffers." - DJ Calligaro

"Although it may not be similar to the actual 3D programs such as Maya, the fact that we are building is helping us understand other programs better. Along with helping us understand building programs better, it was also interesting to build whatever we desired." - Carol Park

"Many of the tools used in Second Life are universal in modern day 3d software. Tools such as the scale, rotation, and position even look the same as those in many 3d applications" - Brandon Thomas

"It was really fun flying around and look at what other people created out of their imagination. It was almost like you were allowed to look into people`s creative side and interact with it. I also liked that I could interact with the environment." - Sarah Kwon

"It was interesting to be able to meet everyone in the class without physically being in the same room at the same time and being able to communicate with every person. It was much more entertaining than any other online forum where people can chat because everyone is able to see everyone else. It was like meeting in class but without actually having to leave your desk. In addition to this, what makes Second Life more interesting than simply signing into a chat room or having a conversation with a group of people online is that the world actually shows 3D space where avatars can walk by or perform many other tasks that people can do in real life. Building objects in Second Life is not as complicated as building with other 3D software programs but still has many of the same components of building." - Miranda Tacchia

"After my experience in the class and exploring Second Life I learned how to work with 3D objects, got more design experience in a 3D world and placement of objects--almost like designing layout of a real life space in addition to the visual aspect of it. Definitely a great new experience." - Devon Whitehead
"I thought this project was especially effective in allowing us to experience the production process. Before we started building, we had to come up with a cohesive design theme -- heaven and hell-- and then use these themes to inspire further designs for our space on the island. This was a good way to discover how the production pipeline works. I found that some people enjoyed different tasks more than others. Hsying, Liana, and Andrew, for example, loved building. I enjoyed coming up with sketches and designing the “look” of hell using references from Greek mythology and Dante’s Inferno." - Jill Takemiya

"I feel that I learned to be a more active member of the team. Also I learned how to use primitive 3D objects to try to create structures that I wanted to make. I learned more about basic shapes than what I learned in any other art classes." - Andrew Wright

"What I liked the best was the chance to build and have an are somewhere whether it be in virtual reality or not that I helped give life to. I enjoyed the synergy between myself and Shelly Forbes when I would acquire her help in world. I loved that someone liked or cared to hear about my ideas." - Michelle Nunez

"Having to work in large groups to achieve a common goal was a great way to prepare us for future work situations. While it was not easy, it did make for a unique view on producing something as large as what we had to do. In the end it feels good to be a part of creating something as a group and seeing it through to the end." - Art Lopez

"The main detracting point of Second Life is its look. In the age of photo real computer graphics, astonishing light and shadow dynamics, life-like water physics and motion-captured animation, Second Life seems to be falling behind. The characters in the game are very low-poly and poorly animated." - Eytan Zana

**Instructor evaluation…**

For the most part, this was a stimulating and interesting process. I was able to see the team building and creativity this environment brought to my classes. This project moved students forward into applications that they will use throughout their tenure at Otis. The tools in Second Life are the same used in Cinema 4D, for example, one of the new programs being adopted in the broadcast design industry and at Otis. Many of the programs the school uses currently (such as Maya and Photoshop) can be applied to Second Life.

The time I devoted to these classes was more than double the usual. All three classes met one a week for an hour in-world. Finding times where everyone could meet was a challenge and required a commitment and many late evenings. Meetings and classroom management in-world kept me very busy. I had to know all my students real names as well as their Second Life names. The major problem for in-class meeting was getting students online and into Second Life all at the same time.
The college’s Internet bandwidth had not been upgraded and we could not get everyone on line at the same time. Even when we did, the whole environment would lag terribly. This was indeed challenging. Nevertheless we plowed forward.

It was my pleasure to see the different environments come to life. I was more than pleased with the results and am looking forward to doing this next fall. I will make several changes on how I frame and present the project next year based on what I observed, read, and learned this past fall. Having seen what the students came up with in just 13 hours, makes me to wonder what they could come up with in a class devoted entirely to Second Life could do…

--Michael Wright (/faculty/michael-wright) (aka Mrags Writer)
Digital Media