Becoming Creative Through Self Observation: 
A (Second Order) Cybernetic Learning Strategy for the Metaverse

Elif Ayiter, Sabanci University and Planetary Collegium, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study describes some of the key components of an art educational domain entitled "ground<e>". This undertaking takes its trajectory from "the Groundcourse", a revolutionary art educational strategy based on cybernetics, developed and implemented in England during the 1960's, upon which the author proposes to develop an art educational strategy based upon self observation. Since this proposal strongly takes into account second order cybernetics, a brief survey into the field as well as an overview of Gordon Pask's learning theories is provided. Approaches for adapting these founding theories, through a consideration of the potential novel affordances of a three dimensional online builder's world, is described through two case studies based upon autonomous learning and self observation implemented through avatars.

Keywords: Avatar, Conversation Theory, Groundcourse, Identity, Learning, Metaverse, Multiple Self, Second Order Cybernetics, Uncanny Valley

ORIGINS

The aim of the Groundcourse was to create an environment which would foster the rethinking of preconceptions, prejudices and fixations with regards to self, society, personal/social limitations, art and all the ensuing relationships brought about through a range of carefully thought out assignments that entailed behavioral modification and ultimately change. At the core of all learning activity was a concept of power, the will to shape and to change, this indeed being The Groundcourse’s overriding educational goal. The core assignments were behavioral projects in which the learners were directly and personally engaged. One of the tasks was the acquisition of a totally new personality, which was largely the converse of what students would consider to be their normal “selves.” The students monitored their new personalities with calibrators which they designed to read off their responses to situations, materials, tools, and people within a completely new set of operant conditions. These responses were then used in the creation of mind maps which were utilized for understanding behavioral patterns dictated by changes in the limitations of space, substance, and state.

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These “new” personalities were asked to form hexagonal groups which had the task of producing an ordered entity out of substances and space, embarked upon with severe limitations on individual behavior and ideas. Concluding the 6 week long assignment was the full visual documentation of a process which had demanded full engagement from its participants. Hence, throughout the behavioral exercise, a step-by-step second order cybernetic observational system was skillfully evoked and enacted, aiding the search for relationships and ideas unfamiliar to art, as well as reflecting and becoming aware “of the flexibility of their responses, their resourcefulness and ingenuity in the face of difficulties. What they assumed to be ingrained in their personalities they now tend to see as controllable. A sense of creative viability is being acquired” (Ascott, 2003).

**Avatar Constellations**

The Groundcourse employed the creation, enactment and observation of new personalities as an integral unit of its learning system. This is of particular significance in the virtual domain where not just one such new personality, but a whole pantheon of diverse identities can be created by a single individual. The Groundcourse brought the above described second order cybernetic construct into being through groupings of individual students. This approach can certainly be brought into play in a metaverse through the participation of discrete individuals. However, a second approach, involving the many different facets of a single individual, engaged in self-reflective observation, may also be in the offering.

Avatars play an important role in structuring social interactions, as their inhabitants both consciously and unconsciously use them in ways very similar to their material body (Damer, 1997). While the basic avatar is a human of either sex, avatars can have a wide range of physical attributes, and may be customized to produce a wide variety of humanoid and other forms. Furthermore a single person may have multiple accounts, i.e. “alts”. Also, a single Resident’s appearance can vary at will, as avatars are very easily modified. Given that they visually portray an inhabitant and allow visual communication, Suler (2007) also contends that avatar appearance is crucial for identity formation in virtual worlds. Reid (1997) describes them as a “real” person’s proxy, puppet or delegate to an online environment”.

Bailenson and Yee (2007) also verify the profound nature of the relationship of the individual to his/her avatar. Studies on addiction, on whether the changes in self-representation that virtual environments allow individuals affect behavior both in-world as well as in “real life”, the motivations of participation and play, related to demographics such age, gender and usage pattern, investigation into the benefits of embodied perspective-taking in immersive virtual environments (2006), research into whether social behavior and norms in virtual environments are comparable to those in the physical world (2007) all show that there is indeed ample material for implementing an educational methodology that embraces the breaking up of behavioral ruts due to preconceptions related to self, society and creativity through the realization and enactment of new personalities, through the avatar.

Alt avatars are supplementary accounts through which a virtual world resident can operate as a separate entity, together with or separately from the main avatar. While some users prefer to operate these alternative identities as standalone personalities, an equally common scenario is that many different alt avatars are logged into the system concurrently, creating setups which are almost akin to child’s play involving many dolls.

Harris (2000) describes children’s Role Play using externalized objects, such as dolls or other toy artifacts, as a prop for projecting different persona; saying that children “create such characters out of thin air, positioning them at various points in their actual environment” (Harris, 2000). According to Harris, these extended play sessions need not necessarily involve outsiders but are also often performed by the isolated child. Role Play, says Harris,
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