Chapter 22

Art and Didactics in Virtual Worlds: How Technology Can Activate Social Skills

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ABSTRACT

Moving from an art experience in a virtual world ending into a school project, technology appears to be a good instrument to activate a deep emotional impact. Immersive art works with this assumption considers the viewers as important part of the artwork, giving them a changing significance depending on who they are. This is possible thanks to the emotional impact of the installation on the users. Moving this premises to school, a project with 12-year-old students shows that it is possible to use emotional involvement of immersive reality to guide teens toward the discovery and analysis of their own emotions, in order to enhance both their self-esteem and their social skills.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, modern world has been deeply transformed and changed by the Digital Revolution. This change has involved every area of human life so deeply that even the creativity of many historical science fiction scenarios has been put to the test. Asimov, Orwell, Bradbury and other major writers from the post-war period had often highlighted the dichotomy between technology as a form of pure intelligence and humanity, as intelligence mediated by emotions. Nowadays, instead, human emotions just go through technology that now appears to be the preferred means of sharing, a place in which social relationships can be managed and where even emotions can be conveyed. Despite being a highly discussed topic, this is far from representing an issue. You may like it or not, it represents the new direction social relationships are moving in. Teenagers are becoming more and more comfortable with this new social-emotional dimension, being extremely attracted to everything “technological” by which relationships with peers can be built and, using some “hidden” account, parental control easily avoided. It’s not that easy for parents, instead, to keep up with the fast changing world of teens and Social Networks.

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All that said, it goes without saying how important it is today for school to play a key role in students’ growth by supporting them through their intellectual and, especially, emotional development.

In Italy, Secondary Education School includes children aged 10/11 to 13/14. It is a period of big changes for children, even confusing, at times. From their childhood world they quickly start to move through the various adolescence stages: from a world mainly focused on the emotions deriving from their family relationships, they enter a world of individuals, whose often overwhelming emotions are experienced and shared within a group of peers. The change they are going through can be felt while they are in the classroom, where they interact with school-friends who also represent the “peer group” they mostly interact with.

Teachers can often witness the anxiety, the excessive competitive spirit and the emotional confusion spreading among students. This kind of behaviour can be disruptive and may even interfere with schoolwork and students’ performance. In order to manage such a rapid evolution of students’ personality, school must be constantly and greatly committed to promote and shape the development of students’ positive social behaviour.

Learning how to be part of a group, despite individual needs that can often lead to conflicting behaviours, is essential to the building of those behavioural skills that will grow with them throughout their life.

Moreover working on emotions at school represents an aspect of teaching practice that has been extensively treated from a pedagogical perspective. Feeling comfortable at school is the starting point for an effective learning process based on the premise of undisputed pedagogical theories brought forth by renown psychologists likes of Jean Piaget, with his Theory of Intellectual Development (1964), Lev Semënovic Vygotskij (About Zone of Proximal Development 1934), Kurt Lewin (Field Theory of Learning - 1946), and John Dewey (Social Learning Theory -1938).

In recent years, a great number of studies on this subject have been undertaken by psychologists, such as, for example, the studies on cooperative learning, still relevant today, carried out by R. and D. Johnson (1975). These studies have led to the development of teaching methods designed to stimulate and encourage a positive environment in class, considered to be a key element for an effective learning process. Cooperative learning, problem solving, peer education, they keep on being extensively discussed topics even today.

The experiences reported in this study show how, in order to create and encourage positive workgroups in class, it is possible to experiment these methods inside a 3D virtual world, first by developing an identification process of individuals with an avatar, and then by stimulating the metacognition of the work done to usefully support the re-elaboration of the emotions entailed by the same identification process.

This project started after the teacher herself had lived an immersive experience in a 3D virtual world. As also discussed by psychologists and sociologists over the last ten years (Romeo A. Canestrari P., 2010, Giuliano, L. 1997), this immersive experience gave the teacher the chance to observe how emotional suggestions could be powerfully conveyed by the individuals who identified themselves with an avatar.

**ART’S EMOTIONAL IMPACT IN VIRTUAL WORLDS**

Virtual worlds and serious games are an important means of activation of emotional involvement. In virtual worlds virtual lives parallel to the real ones can sometimes be experienced. They represent a place where you can fall in love, build solid friendships, argue, get angry or cry, and none of these emotions can be simply defined as just “virtual”. The emotional chords they strike are real, even if they are generated,