Facilitating Art Education:  
The UWA Arts Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Art and design students in SL experience the advantages of a visually rich environment where they can take a leading role in their own learning, have the opportunity to create objects that defy real world limitations, are immersive and interactive, and where they are able to collaborate with a community of global art practitioners. The 3D Art Challenges started at the University of Western Australia in Second Life in 2009. Since that time, UWA has rapidly emerged as a central hub of art activity in SL. The story of UWA’s journey into Second Life and a recent survey of past and present participants of the UWA Art Challenges indicate that the environment of a virtual world is well suited to the teaching of art and design skills. The UWA Art Challenges have the potential to be valuable resources for educators and students.

Keywords: 3D Art Challenges, Art, Education, Second Life (SL), University of Western Australia (UWA), Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds are creative entities, as everything in the world is built by the “residents”. Art education is suited to the environment of a virtual world. Gül, Gu, and Williams (2008) describe virtual worlds as places where students can view objects from multiple perspectives, and develop knowledge and skills within a collaborative environment. They cite Dede (1995) who points out advantages such as being able to experiment without real world repercussions, the ability to personalize the environment and to ‘learn by doing’.

Jacka and Ellis (2010) state that an increasing body of research has led a number of educators to see the potential of using virtual worlds for the education of artists and art teachers. They mention Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia) and Griffith University (Queensland, Australia), with virtual learning spaces for teaching creative arts and technology to primary teacher trainees. Grenfell (2010) discusses the authentic learning that occurred when students from two separate degree programmes (public relations and art) were combined on a project to establish and promote a virtual art gallery. A Second Life (SL) space, the Art Café, where students can meet and exhibit their work, has been reported by Lu (2008a, 2008b, 2009), and a collaboration between Penn State University and North Illinois University aimed at linking the makers of art with those whom critique art has been discussed by Liao and Wang (2010, as cited by Jacka & Ellis, 2010).

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The UWA (The University of Western Australia, Perth) has become a focal point of artistic endeavor in Second Life, and the UWA Art & Design Challenges have brought together professional artists and those learning the skills of the artist. Anecdotal information reported by media has indicated that many RL (Real Life) artists have sought an alternative pathway through virtual art and many more artists have found their niché as artists within SL (Second Life) as a result of the UWA challenges. The story of UWA’s involvement in SL appears to be a story of learning. The challenges train artists in a dynamic, stimulating, supportive and collaborative environment, where the learner takes the leading role (see Figure 1).

AIMS AND STRUCTURE

The purpose of writing this report was to focus on the educational resources available through the Art Challenges sponsored and run by the UWA. Personal anecdotes and media coverage suggested that the Art Challenges were valuable learning and teaching tools, but no empirical evidence had ever been collected. Although there is a small but steadily increasing body of literature on art education in virtual worlds, a gap existed in a lack of data covering the use of the UWA Art Challenges and whether or not these are, indeed, useful tools for art educators and students.

This report has attempted to examine briefly the literature, specifically the literature that deals with art education in Second life, and to see if this literature relates to the Art Challenges. No extensive or comprehensive literature review has been attempted.

A survey was conducted by Jegathesan and Hearns during May-June 2011 to investigate the current demographic who use the Art Challenges and to gauge the opinions of participants and visitors to the UWA art facilities. It was hoped that some information could be collected regarding the number of educators and students who access and utilise the resources. The survey was not specifically designed as an examination of art education and the UWA. This report includes information from the survey that was deemed significant to the main focus of this report.

This report points the way for future research. It is hoped that the indications of the usefulness of the Art Challenges for art educators is strong enough to motivate increased educational use of the UWA facilities and will enable future rigorous research to be conducted.

A comprehensive survey report will be available in publication mid-2012.

Figure 1. Art Challenges: the entries for the ‘Perfume’ themed competition, February 2012, in the area on the left; and previous winners on the right hand side. The bottom level and Level 2 contain scripted art works, and Level 3 (not shown) contains unscripted art works. © [2012] [Hearns]. Used with permission.
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