The Zarathustra Project

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Abstract:

> There is a widespread demand for general, all-purpose platforms for e-teaching. It is argued that such platforms are ill suited to explore the wide range of possibilities opened up by digital communication technologies, in particular by object oriented MOO servers. Drawing on the author's use of a LambdaMOO server in teaching Friedrich Nietzsche's "Also sprach Zarathustra" the innovative potential of interactive, virtual text-worlds is explored.

Computer assisted teaching is an increasingly popular research topic. Recently I've been interviewed by journalists as well as graduate students collecting material for radio features or M.A. reports. It has been a painful experience. One is, of course, accustomed to the rule of slogans in media society. But it is difficult to surpass the simple-mindedness shown by self-appointed experts on e-teaching. The repertoire of questions one is usually asked is extremely limited: "What tools are you using?" "Which features are missing?" "How much time do you spend?" And technical expertise is often lacking. Vienna University, Austria's largest, has just awarded its top prize for innovative teaching to a project based on a MSN community's site running in the Seattle area. According to several participants recurring breakdowns of the remote server were quite frustrating. So, why did they pick this service in the first place? The reason given is instructive: Because Vienna University still lacks a single, comprehensive e-learning system. [1]

This is the stuff disasters are made of. The superficiality of such attitudes is, if I may say so, deeply disturbing. E-learning is considered on a par with e-mail or e-banking: you need one, or at most a few, global standards governing a limited number of relevant transactions. In case your university cannot yet supply the necessary tools just join a convenient subnet somewhere else on the planet. It makes good sense to users of "hotmail.com", but it is a problematic move when it comes to university teaching. One would expect academic teachers to show more concern for the uniqueness of context in learning environments. Scholarly freedom does, after all, imply autonomy in picking and transforming the required methodological apparatus. University-wide teaching systems should, therefore, be regarded with extreme caution. It does not follow that, just because all courses are (helpfully) registered in a database and graded according to (hopefully) common criteria, they conform to some set of simple pedagogical principles implemented by an all-purpose software platform.

The Setting

One obvious difference between the digital protocols governing e-mail or e-commerce and computer-assisted teaching is that the latter is an ongoing, open-end process between individuals. Software constructs aimed at enhancing human cognitive development face constraints very different from software systems underlying the transfer of messages. Yet, it appears to be very attractive to draw a parallel between the improvements in data exchange initiated by the TCP/IP protocols and accelerated knowledge acquisition supported by fast computers. University administrators and sales representatives like to stress the importance of cost reduction and economies of scale. They tend to forget that teaching remains a social experience for all participants, determined by a considerable number of local parameters. There is an important body of literature on virtual communities, from mailing lists to Usenet groups and chat rooms, investigating the shift of meaning imposed upon commonsense terms like "neighbourhood", "identity" or "sex" in the context of social life in digital networks. [2] The impact of virtual learning environments upon the pedagogical canon has not been investigated in such detail. One likely reason is that software constructs often encountered in this area ("Web forums", "discussion groups" etc) are little more than data containers masquerading as places or events. Such constructs do not even reach the threshold of *bona fide* cyber-communities.

Given this background a teaching project facing the precarious character of educational interaction in "cyberspace" is well advised to start from bottom up, employing only as much machinery as can easily be administered and customized by the project's core team. One piece of software fulfilling these requirements is the enCore educational MOO developed by Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes at the University of Dallas, Texas [3]. Building on Pavel Curtis' famous LambdaMOO [4] enCore is in essence a database accessible via a network server by any number of users participating in a shared, virtual environment. In plain text the server provides descriptions of rooms populated by avatars under remote control by their respective creators in real time. The easiest way to imagine the results is as a cross between chat and interactive fiction. The standard enCore database supports an object-oriented programming language designed by Pavel Curtis. On top of it Xpress, a Web application, adds JavaScript as well as Java functionality to the database.

This set of programs can easily be run from UNIX or Microsoft platforms and has proofed to be extremely stable on a 800 MHz Linux machine, equipped with 512MB of RAM over a 10 Moot Ethernet connection. The initial enCore base includes facilities for user administration, a variety of internal communication devices, a help system and – most importantly – an extensive set of construction tools, allowing users to create personal environments by "building" rooms and equipping them with a range of "objects" that may be programmed to implement particular actions, like moving around, uttering statements or triggering more complex chains of events. A number of tools for educational use are included, e.g. a generic virtual auditorium, a classroom and a tape recorder, plus templates for developing lectures or slide shows. Taken together an enCore installation offers a comprehensive environment for cooperative, real-time virtual world-construction. [5]

Zarathustra for desktop use?

There are many ways to teach philosophy. One popular procedure is to present close readings of certain canonical texts. Since the curriculum includes documents starting from antiquity many different genres are available. For the purpose of a first encounter between

hermeneutics and a MOO space it seemed appropriate to pick a philosophical treatise famous for its narrative drive and wealth of pictures, metaphors and rhetoric twists, namely Friedrich Nietzsche's "Also sprach Zarathustra", successively published from 1883-86. This book features a well-defined itinerary of its main proponent [6], thereby providing a structural grid, which can easily be mapped onto virtual space. To come up with a digitally enriched "Zarathustra", suitable for desktop use, was, however, not the aim of the project, which was targeted at exploring the interference between a canonical philosophical text and a given collection of software tools. The intention was not to build a Zarathustra simulation, but rather to construct an interface between Nietzsche's thought and co-operative digital thought-design.

At the beginning of the seminar the MOO offered very little. Taking a hint from MUD history and alluding to one of "Zarathustra's" most famous locations, beginning users were put into a marketplace which featured a town hall, a library, a café and several exits, one of them leading to a war memorial, another one into a narrow street of medieval character. The idea was to extend this scenario in parallel with regular, conventional seminar sessions discussing Nietzsche's text. The ensuing course of events showed to distinctly different temperaments. Almost immediately readers of "Zarathustra" found themselves in contraposition to MUD users, i.e. participants wanting to follow Nietzsche's lead were pitted against those taking up the challenge of enCore. Considerable time was spent in order to mediate between those attitudes, putting equal emphasis on familiarizing students with Nietzsche's philosophical doctrines and on mastering the fundamentals of MOO-style object-oriented programming. These endeavours produced admittedly idiosyncratic, yet instructive hybrid architecture, as philosophical *topoi* mixed with digital readings of Nietzsche, electronic transformations of key concepts of the Zarathustra repertoire and a thought-provoking collection of free-style extensions on the canonical input.

I'll have to restrict myself to some general observations on this hybrid construction. The crucial tension arose between the standard attitudes of humanistic studies and of computer science respectively. Whereas philosophers are trained to respectfully recognize the power and normative precedence of traditional paradigms, software engineers are accustomed to permanent change, often developing their projects from scratch and lacking decades or even centuries of prior professional discussion. Both group's strategies, predictably, diverge to a considerable degree. Understanding a chapter of Nietsche's "Zarathustra" is a world apart from "building a home" in MOO parlance, i.e. from programming the enCore database. Even though there are comfortable tools to adorn one's personal place with all the visual qualities of advanced HTML, designing a web page quite simply is not terribly attractive to the average philosophically minded student. And yet, the main point of the enterprise was to explore this clash of cultures. One manifest consequence was that most of the individual "homes" that were being built were only vaguely reminiscent of the Nietzsche text. The MOO tradition calls for colourful descriptions of fancy places serving as billboards advertising the virtual *persona* and this tradition also affected FREIRAUM. Its first stage of development was marked by a loose assembly of virtual places barely linked to the public infrastructure or against each other.

Review

In retrospect this was to be expected. Building a room within a MOO is, after all, just adding to a chart. This *cannot* in itself give rise to a structure appropriate for social interaction or the

modelling of philosophical arguments. One has to pre-invest social meaning into this machinery in order to be able to explore its scope. Somewhat belatedly a general layout of the MOO was introduced. It determined some fixed point of reference, while trying to retain the imaginative energy that had gone into the initial building process. A MOO map traced the overall features of the virtual city, leaving enough to be discovered in private investigation. But what about philosophical content? On the face of it there seemed to be a lot of cafes, workshops, galleries and galaxies, but little of the Nietzsche exegesis that I had regularly offered in the accompanying seminar. Orthodox Nietzsche scholars will certainly be under whelmed and fail to see the point of the exercise.

One of the recurrent questions raised in the interviews I have mentioned at the beginning was whether computer-assisted strategies improve the quality of teaching. From my point of view this is the wrong thing to ask. What kind of linear improvement could one expect from confronting cultural classics with powerful, but largely untested software? As an orthodox philosopher I have to deplore the lack of focus and conceptual rigour invited by the MOO facilities. My attempt to impress students with a professional philosophical reading of the Nietzsche text has certainly been spoiled by electronic gadgets. Yet, looking at the project this way is obviously missing the point. The issue cannot turn on improvement in any straight sense. A change of rules rather than advancement on a given scale is at stake here. It's easy to overlook that the humble database sketched above actually is an entirely new invention, opening up philosophical texts to social on-line co-operation around the clock. Nothing like this has ever existed in the history of the discipline. Students are prompted to inhabit the world of "Zarathustra". It seems natural that they should shape the printed material according to their need.

I shall only mention three features that turn installations like FREIRAUM into promising platforms of interchange between the humanities and digital, networked communication. Given easy access to object oriented programming techniques students are offered a new approach towards theoretical contexts. Nietzsche's highly figurative discourse supports this development particularly well. The book's characteristic geography consists, among other things, of mountains, woods, caves, deserts and islands. Its zoology includes an eagle and a snake, spiders, monkeys, lions and a camel. This entire symbolic inventory can easily be re-interpreted by virtual entities, even though one has to be careful to avoid banality. But there are more profound attempts to cross-fertilize Nietzsche philology and interactive text design. Take, for example, the current debate on a feminist reading of the author. [7] Two different reactions by female students provide a vivid commentary within the virtual environment. One idea was to build a brothel ("Freudenhaus"), focussing on the contrast between Nietzsche's theoretical exuberance and real-life misery; in contraposition another move was to collect some of Nietzsche's worst misogynistic aphorisms into a kind of re-education camp. Another item exemplifying philosophical imagination triggered by the MOO was an attempt to implement Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" by means of a clever construction of exits connected in an (*prima vista*) inescapable circle.

Detailed analysis would be necessary to show inasmuch such contributions are not just cheap echoes of the "really important" philosophical stuff, but rather – at last to some extent – genuine philosophy in a new setting. Consider, secondly, the challenge to mirror certain of Nietzsche's doctrines in software. "The Will to Power" is an obvious example. One response to this idea was to design a game-like competition inviting players to run through several levels before arriving at the "top of the world". Another media-induced reconfiguration was

the use of an animated passport to demonstrate and discuss the philosopher's attitude towards identity and nationhood. My third note refers to activities built upon the fact that the MOO is a live installation; open 24 hours the day in real time. You may arrange events there: lectures, workshops, parties and theatrical performances. Such initiatives can quickly become very complex, like the lecture given by a teaching assistant that started in a virtual auditorium and ended in disarray when the speaker/writer called in the listeners/readers to "move" into another room the name of which happened to be the name of the adjacent real-life lecture hall. It was a memorable way to make Nietzsche's point about the precarious balance between truth and appearance.

The project described here obviously does not fit into mainstream e learning. It does not contain pre-set assignments, discussion forums or carefully drafted units of knowledge presented in an orderly fashion for step after step consumption. The idea was rather to arrange a methodological jamboree drawing on resources from traditional philosophy, literature, theatre and everyday culture, including computer games. There are, consequently, no general lessons to be drawn from the enterprise, but some remarks on popular trends in e teaching nevertheless suggest themselves. There is a huge discrepancy between the common format of electronic class ware and the potential revealed by the MOO experiment. Register cards are widely used to provide a digital mimicry of traditional learning units, clearly separated from each other in space and time. This kind of layout provides easy orientation and is, to be sure, convenient for undisturbed information exchange. The drawback is that such classifications neglect some of the most intriguing opportunities afforded by electronic networked interaction.

Numerous virtual communities on the net are convincing evidence of a new kind of social life, unlimited by the constraints of physical geography and developing largely uncoerced, out of shared interests and governed by rules determined by the participants themselves. None of this has been developed for the purpose of formal education and most of it is somewhat naive and of little interest to the pedagogical industry. Yet, it is by risking direct contact with occasional chaos arising from information overload that current technologies can themselves be explored and tested as possible enhancements and substitutes for more traditional procedures. The tentative meeting of philosophical orthodoxy and free-style writing in FREIRAUM may serve as a reminder that teaching is more than a case of knowledge management, applied to obedient recipients.

References:

■   Cf. http://www.univie.ac.at/innovation

■   See, for example, Steven G. Jones (ed.) *CyberSociety. Computer-mediated Communication and Community*. London 1994. Sage; Sherry Turkle *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York 1995. Simon & Schuster; Rob Shields (ed.) *Cultures of the Internet. Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*. London 1996. Sage; David Holmes (ed.) *Virtual Politics. Identity and Community in Cyberspace*. London 1997. Sage; Charles Ess, Fay Sudweeks (ed.) *Culture, Technology, Communication. Towards an Intercultural Global Village*. Albany 2001. SUNY Press.

■   The project's URL is http.//lingua.utdassal.edu/encore.

■   http://www.moo.mud.org

5.   The MOO's address is http://freiraum.philo.at

6.   The layout is discribed by Beatrix Himmelmann in her contribution *Zarathustras Weg* in Volker Gerhard (ed.) Friedrich Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Berlin 200. p.17-45.

7.   Cf. Rebecca Stringer *"A Nietzschean Breed"*. *Feminism, Victimology,* Ressentiment in: Alan D. Schrift

(ed.) *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture, and Politics*. Berkeley 2000. University of California Press.

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