A TRAVELLER'S TALE – CREATING AVATARS FOR THE WORLD OF ELEARNING

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Abstract: Will a virtual character give real character to your targeted eLearning experience?
This paper focuses on the traits of the eLearning avatars and their potential to generate positive and lasting effects for users and eContent creators alike.
The basic avatar, whether he acts like a virtual tutor or as an advisor, needs to act towards the successful fulfilment of the student's tasks on one hand and on the other hand towards delivering of a good and rewarding learning experience so that the student will enjoy the subject and return for another lesson. In order to achieve these two main tasks, the avatar should provide, as backbone, guidance, tips and appropriate feedback.
Building a successful avatar, not just an avatar, is, in part, building a successful human replica. We will journey and assimilate, in a step-by-step fashion, new methods to give digital life and relevant reputation to the avatars of your educational materials.
First, the basis for our soon to be superhero educational character: how humans acquire new friends in virtual space. The psychological aspects that govern such interactions will prove invaluable. Second, our focus will slightly move towards friend-human to friend-human communication. Next, a successful eLearning avatar should be much more than the guide of his lesson. That is why we will evolve him socially, breaking new ground in the process, away from the plain and tasteless lesson prisoners "the teacher", "the pet", "the young boy", "the young girl". Benefiting from the rise of the social networks, our virtual characters will be able to connect informally and much more effectively in the long term.

Keywords: avatar creation, virtual social integration, elearning brand development, social networks

I. INTRODUCTION

eLearning means many things for many people. For some it is computer assisted education. For others, including myself, it is enhanced learning, the sum of all the tools needed to bring forth and to create a better learning experience. The entertainment industry got it right. With the help of technology it has been employing symbolism successfully for decades.

Nowadays, back to the educational scene, one, and very important sore point, is itching. Our traditional educational content disseminators, at a global scale, are not in sync with technology. We could blame it on the speed of change, lack of funding, but the real end result is not short of tragic: schools are preparing their students not for the future, but for the past. By providing irrelevant learning experiences, under par learning, we are making more harm than good with the traditional approaches. Some international channels known for providing educational content via television chose to dumb down their content in order to reach a broader audience, effectively throwing in the towel in order to survive.

The future of mankind and mankind products will be decided in the social arena. Today many companies and institutions are actively burning through increasing amounts of money in order to

develop and protect their brands on social networks. These entities know the true power of the masses. That is why in the online world, one character named The Green Lantern has 261.000 fans. Together with his 5 friends named Wonder Woman (103.000 fans), Superman (1.636.400 fans), Batman (2.852.000 fans), The Flash (60.000 fans) and Aqua man(29.000 fans), they have a total of 4.941.400 fans – a number bigger than the total number of Romanian users on facebook.

So, on this environment enter the eLearning avatars.

In order to create buzz, virality, businesses have to understand how users interact with each other in the social space. In the offline world, most humans belong to tribes. In the online world things are exactly the same. These tribes have evolved sufficiently to communicate seamless between both mediums.

We will try to scratch the surface of how a brand should behave in social space and then establish the creation story of a successful eLearning avatar, one that becomes an icon of your tribe.

II. HOW WE "FALL IN FRIENDSHIP" WITH TRIBES

One of the most interesting and active tribes found online are those focused on social dancing. These groups communicate online as much as they communicate offline and thus they are benefiting from healthy growth. Most of the "content" for these groups is generated offline; the online is used for talking about that content.

The process of entering and gaining friends successfully, as a human, in one such community and is the following:

1. You begin by learning, taking offline dancing lessons at a popular school known for teaching that dance.

2. You go with your classmates to places where they play the music for that specific dance, during that time you do not quit the offline lessons.

3. At this point you can easily connect online and offline to anyone in your city that belongs or wants to belong to that tribe, as long as you first introduce yourself with topics relevant to that community.

4. Next step is to climb the internal social ladder by getting good at what is that you are doing and by engaging the leaders.

Closest in terms of trust will be your classmates, the people that struggle to learn the same things you do.

Second, people you meet at gatherings, fans of the habit, people that believe in something related to it.

Third- the jump to online - members that you don't know personally but you know they are in the same tribe as you, that share your passion

What can we learn from this? Roughly four things:

1. People engage people that have the same habits as them, people that struggle with the same issues they struggle with. A habit is not just a one-time action.

2. People feel at ease in talking with people they have seen somewhere, maybe at an event that carried value for them.

3. People like pre-validation, if people from your group think that somebody is ok, you will tend to think that they are ok too

4. Leaders, influencers, trendsetters, all have the power to successfully market your products into their group and not come out as spam delivery agents. By validating your products they counteract some of the consumer blindness.

This process is simple and natural and can be successfully adapted to engage most tribes found online. At this point in time by deciding to not use one of the two available channels (the online, the offline) will result in untapped potential. Both channels have to be used for maximum impact[4].

III. FRIENDSHIP ACHIEVED –BRAND COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL SPACE, PATRONS

Most communication on social networks is informal and thus our brands and avatars should communicate in the same manner.

Being formal is perceived as looking down on the exact people that help you build your brand. As a social network user it is annoying to receive an answer formulated like a machine. It shows no emotion. People want to talk to people.

Humans go online to comment, share pictures, share songs, talk about events and most of it is done in fast forward mode.

When a brand comments without invitation on a post of a human it comes off as inappropriate. In order to minimize the stress on the human participants, patrons should be used to ease the process.

A patron is a real person that is in charge of a brand or an avatar. In order to have a positive impact on the process, patrons must have visibility. The game of visibility is a double edged sword; it must be done with extreme caution. If the reputation of the patron is damaged, the brand will lose direction. The moment when a patron becomes visible should be decided considering your brand's exposure.

IV. BRIDGING THE GAP – INTRODUCING YOUR AVATARS TO THE WORLD

A great eLearning team knows that avatar creation is not easy. Making a simple graphical representation of a human(usually) is not hard and the Internet is full of them. The difficult part comes when a character needs to encompass some desired moral traits and then sustain them throughout his existence. The avatar must have consistency.

Forward, avatars function as hybrids. They are a cross between humans and brands and should be treated as such. Although they can go and get away with things companies cannot, they still need a visible patron.

People want to know the humans behind companies and brands. They want to know the creators.

eLearning avatars, by nature, are created to teach important concepts to their audiences, no matter what.

In present time, the most advanced eLearning content delivery systems are still based on SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) standards. However, this is changing rapidly. Better alternatives are preparing to take the lead and their adoption is imminent, unless SCORM standards adapt, accommodate and integrate the coming wave of technological breakthroughs [5]

In the near future, eLearning avatars will build upon these new standards and become able to actively engage, compete with, and win, when needed, against any other stimuli.

Imagine a world where an avatar that was helping you understand basic mathematics in an application 8 hours ago is now engaging you on a social network, with the clear objective of refreshing the knowledge that was taught before. What if the avatar was programmed and could engage automatically at a given time? For further control and psychological impact, the avatar could have a teacher as a patron. This could be a major leap in education. With the adoption of mLearning, education will follow everywhere.
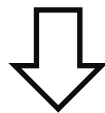
Our online community-EduTeca is created to go there.

Focused on kindergarten eLearning, it now has 30.000 members. This enhanced learning community is growing with a rate of approximately 200 new members every day, most of them being parents and teachers. We share the same vision and a great hunger to improve the future of our children. By providing real content and support, people will trust you.
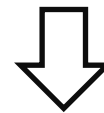
The foundation stone of the community is a collection of eLearning software created by us to be used on personal computers.

4 of our 8 eLearning avatars have online presence and are engaging users. In our computer software this 4 avatars play the role of mythical educators, capturing attention and giving continuous feedback for a better learning experience. By releasing the avatars from our software into the online world we are creating an adaptive system that is able to integrate and especially communicate, in real-time, to the audience, that we have assimilated the new waves of educational technologies.

Let's outline some of the most important attributes of a great eLearning avatar:

EduTeca eLearning avatar

Offline and software	Online
-captures attention	-stays in character
-gives relevant feedback depending on the situation	-has presence on social networks and is active sharing information of intrest to the comunity
-pays attention to the level of the learner and adapts by increasing difficulty or reducing it, changing talking registry	-has a known patron, positively perceived
-has offline embodiment and visibility	-has the creation story available
-gestures appropriately to stimulate the learner	-engages fans of the brand and fans of the avatar in informal manner
-has a voice (not just bubble text)	-has other avatars as friends and engages them
-is focus point of the interface	-helps and directs when help is needed
-has a creation story	

V. CONCLUSIONS

By employing educational branding and using tools like avatars, entities will be able to integrate new technologies with lesser friction, keep their audiences connected and mesmerized as their products adapt.

mLearning and it's much powerful follower - augmented reality will forever change the educational landscape.

Social media is already playing a decisive role in deciding which content is better and which one deserves the boot. The educational disseminators of tomorrow, in order to be successful, will need to be able to offer active learning solutions and active shielding to their students.

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