

OM'NIUM (VDS) ON-LINE DESIGN EDUCATION

When a computer is deemed obsolete after four months we can safely say that change is indeed rapid in contemporary society. In fact, computer technology is arguably the single most important contributor to this exponential change. Design is one area which has been revolutionised by the computer, so much so that design education seems to lag well behind student needs and expectations. PAUL MCGILLICK looks at an on-line project which has gone a long way towards correcting that situation.



the internet university
the world's first 'global classroom'

off-campus on-line
the world's first 'global classroom'

Om'nium [vds]


virtual design studio
the internet university

the world's first 'global classroom'

the internet university

RICK BENNETT TEACHES DESIGN at the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts. Ask him why he ended up initiating an on-line design education project and he'll answer: "Frustration!"

Ask him how he feels about it as he gears up for *Om'nium Mark II* and he'll say he would never have done it if he had known in advance how much work was entailed. Just look at your free CD-Rom on the cover of this magazine and you see a lot of work and a lot of money – most of it given in kind by co-workers and small businesses who, like Bennett, did it because they believed in the project and the importance of quality design education.



The frustration arose from a sudden realisation by Bennett that design education fell well short of meeting student needs and expectations. In fact, it was more about the needs and expectations of the teachers than the students. As Bennett points out, the Bauhaus was a great institution, but quite a few things have happened in the intervening 70 years. Moreover, Bennett detected a widening gap between design education and design practice

Bennett's response to his epiphany was to survey his students. This confirmed his gut feeling and also alerted him to the fact that there was a 'new student' who required a different approach. The internet immediately suggested itself as a way around some of the shortcomings of the traditional studio method – the net's anonymity, speed of communication, lack of time/space restrictions, its ability to work simultaneously in real and stored time, its variety of formats, its sociability etc.

But the focus of *Om'nium* was always on the principles rather than the technology. The aim was to keep it simple so that even computer-challenged people could cope. In fact, part of the exercise was to explore the potential of the internet because, in Bennett's view, it has so far remained largely unexplored with a tendency simply to place existing applications (eg. print information) in a more accessible place – "proving that the technology works," as Bennett puts it. Sites tend to be designed by programmers rather than designers, often making them distinctly user-unfriendly. Not only that, most of the precedents had been in architectural design education with a strong emphasis on outcomes with the ends very much predicated on beginnings.

>>



OMNIUM STUDENTS WITH RICK BENNETT, CENTRE

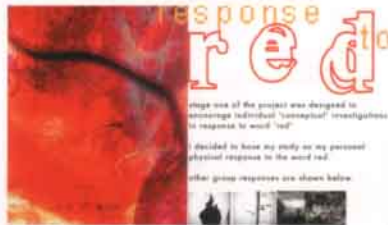


the om'nium [vds] project involved 50 design students from 11 countries, (15 universities) delivered across five continents, challenging the same conceptual brief, on-line in collaboration via the internet.

The collaboration progressed from July 19 - September 23 and was facilitated by Rick Bennett at the university of new south wales, sydney, australia with assistance from four internationally renowned designers [john warwicker - tomato, andy polaine - antrom, susan cohn - workshop 3000] and jamie fox - former online architectural editor at 'interior'.

om'nium [vds] has the potential to rapidly revolutionise and refresh university design education and is a world first for such an approach in a truly international and innovative, internet-based 'global classroom'.

This project follows my process in group work during the project [fox@rip.com.au]



OMNIUM LECTURERS AND TUTORS: LEFT TO RIGHT JOHN WARWICKER, SUSAN COHN, ANDY POLAINE AND TOM KOVAC

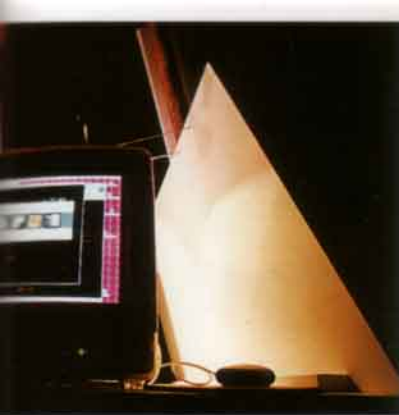
>> Om'nium's emphasis was on interaction and collaboration.

This meant prioritising process over product and an ongoing state of what Donald A Schön calls "controlled confusion". In Bennett's words, the aim was "to create an environment of social interaction, conversation, dialogue, process and critique." Key to this was student motivation and Bennett knew from his surveys that students preferred a collaborative, non-competitive learning environment with a high level of feedback from tutors and peers.

Traditional design education tends to be lecturer-centred and based on what the lecturer feels comfortable teaching and a list of prescribed outcomes (i.e. the end is known at the beginning). This is inimical to true creativity. Om'nium, accordingly, was student-centred, non-prescriptive and process-based.

Fifty design students from 11 countries (15 universities) across five continents and divided into groups of five, collaborated over 10 weeks, responding to a series of open 'unravelling' briefs. The programme was student-driven with the associated lecturers and tutors – Andy Polaine (Antrom), Susan Cohn (Workshop 3000), John Warwicker (Tomato) and Tom Kovac (Kovac Malone) – providing input when and where appropriate. The cross-disciplinary aspect was crucial with students drawn from industrial, graphic and multi-media design disciplines.

To do this Bennett – who freely admits to being a computer novice at the beginning – relied on a team of people who gave their services for free. COFA student Jamie Fox has worked on the project from the beginning and continues to do so, while other practitioners joined at various stages of the production process. Justin Fox designed and produced the first CD-Rom. Chris Mountford from Think Internet Consulting built the Om'nium user interface which allowed the project to take place and Keith Ng and Alan Kan from Co.Lab produced the presentation for the Design 99 conference in Sydney which brought the project into the public domain.



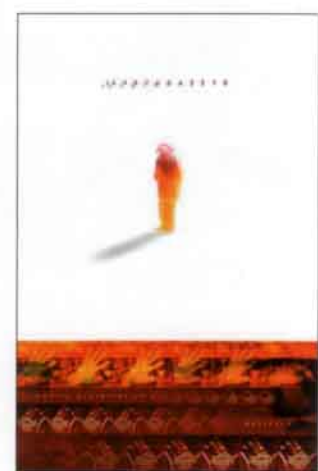
Collaborative problem-solving (and what Schön calls problem-setting), the ongoing experimental nature of the project and the manner in which *Om'nium* constantly threw up new ways for a designer to work, together with the stimulation of a cross-disciplinary context and the constant exposure to one another's work, were some of the measurable benefits of the project.



Within the project, Bennett and his team set up a technical help forum area, consisting of chat rooms, message boards and FAQs (frequently asked questions). Given the technology involved, they anticipated having to provide a lot of help and accordingly allowed a maximum of 24 questions to be 'posted' each day. In the first two weeks, this was fully utilised. But quickly the participants began to develop a peer assistance system, solving their own problems. This was an early signal that a major benefit would be the way in which the students took responsibility for their own learning – something emphasised by the fact that there were no time restrictions and participants could work whenever they wanted to.

Not knowing one another at the start, participants made an extra effort. Quite quickly it became apparent that the anonymity of the web made it easier to criticise one another's work honestly.

Bennett sees the project as "an innovative social and educative experience" which set out to explore the potential of the internet for meeting the needs of design students. It was never technology focused, which meant that it was always accessible – even to the novices – whether it involved teaching, learning or feedback. As Jamie Fox reviews the site design for the next project, her aim is for improved navigation and greater interaction. To do this, she is experimenting with a 3D space which will make it easier to move around and make it more interactive, enabling the user to control it, "to create an almost random path." M36



www.omnium.unsw.edu.au

ABOUT THE CD ROM
OMNIROM V.1.1



This is the second cd-rom presentation produced by *Om'nium* projects. It archives the first *Om'nium* on-line design education initiative: an international, collaborative design process dialogue.

Omnium v.1.1 aims to contain both content and visual interest. It tells a story... a story that can be experienced by the viewer. The presentation is not exclusive to particular audiences but aims to contain something of interest for everyone.

Omnium v.1.1 was built by four dedicated people with no budget but solid enthusiasm. Programming was shared between **Andy Polaine** (ex - Antiform and now Interactive Director at Animal Logic) and **Simon McIntyre**

(COFA graduate and freelance designer). **Jamie Fox** (COFA design student) designed and produced all graphic material for the various stages within the 'story' whilst the creative concepts and overall project direction was provided by **Rick Bennett** (COFA lecturer and Director of *Om'nium* projects).

A fifth contributor **Pierre Odendaal** produced the opening title sequence from London and was one of the 50 students who participated in the original *Om'nium* project.

Omnium v.1.1 is also indebted to its five major sponsors: Adobe Systems, Apple Computers, Macromedia, College of Fine Arts (COFA) - UNSW and Depend for their support to produce and press the cd.

