Genova 2004: a Test-Bed for Industrial Design Students to Integrate Cultural Content and Information Technologies in Cross-Media Platforms°

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1 Introduction

The event Genoa 2004[1] is a tantalizing occasion to stimulate students enrolled in a five-year program in Industrial Design at *Politecnico di Milano* to produce original content to compliment the official program and to experiment with technology using a variety of media. The official Genoa 2004 calendar is structured in three main themes: Genoa, the *City of Arts*; the *Capital of the Sea*; and the *Contemporary City*. Students had to choose one of the three areas, make proposals of new concepts of cultural products and services, and implement the prototype.

Students were asked to consider the wide range of communication technologies available and to design cross-media prototypes, in particular new forms of interactions between classic television and new communication technologies, such as internet or mobile phone. 3D modelling, animation and movie have been used to structure the content. Students were also asked to design interaction in order to create virtual communities and peer-to-peer environments to share knowledge and experience. The authors, as the teachers of the course, valued projects foreseeing engagement, starting before and lasting after the visit to Genoa. The projects that were considered could range from games, light and sounds events in an open area, exhibitions in old renovated places, live theatre performances in the open, interactive guided tours, creative re-cycling programs, cooperative street TV, electronic live music performances; possibly done in post-industrial spaces such as the old Genoa port, restored by Renzo Piano etc.

The goal was to submit the best proposals to the Genoa 2004 Committee but the academic time schedule was conflicting with the deadline. Nevertheless, we showed a selection of projects to the President of the Genoa 2004 Committee and presented the prototypes to a general audience at a traditional meeting place of the old town: *Il Caffè degli Specchi*.

° The educational experience took place in AY 02/03 at the Faculty of Industrial Design, Politecnico di Milano, where the authors were giving the fourth-year semester-long course *Laboratorio di Tecnologie e sperimentazione prototipi II*, for students in the Communication track.

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[1] Genoa has been designated as the European Capital of Culture 2004, along with the French city of Lille, by the Government of EU.

Figure 1. The advertising card of the evening *at Caffé degli Specchi* in Genoa

2 Methodology

There is no great concern in modern Italian society about cultural demands and there is little marketing research going on about how to meet offers and demands. The cultural sector is rather minoritarian and is enjoyed by an elite. We give a few numbers: only 10% of the Italian population go to concerts or operas, 20% go to theaters and the 30% visit art shows or exhibitions. While in USA during the period from II WW to the 90's cultural expenses in the families have been rapidly increasing, even though the expansion has now ceased, in Italy it has been steady in the last 30 years if not decreasing; to this respect probably being against the general trend in other European countries [Trimarchi 2002].

An enlargement of the demands of the cultural offer can only be achieved by introducing dramatic changes in the present system of cultural services. The last century model of a well educated elite who consumes cultural products as a form of social recognition has become obsolete. Cultural products must assume a leisure form to become appealing to a wider audience and new form of hybrid products could find their place. The emergency of new media can play an important role in envisioning new form of fruition and delivery.

One sees some trends that should consolidate in order to affect cultural sector: an increasing number of delivery channels, a mixture of new form of production and consumption and a reshaping of the time-space model of fruition: i.e. museums and shops or cafes; new access to library and archives; new literary forms of readings and writings (hypertext); the new experience of newspaper online; the computer graphic changing the field of

visual arts; digital photography and digital sound reproduction with their internet diffusion.

The emerging model of fruition can be viewed in different moments: out of home, direct fruition of live events in institutional places, such as museums and theaters; at home, reading and electronic media, old TV and radio, as well as broad band internet. New technologies change the consumption behaviour in these areas, that breaks the boundary of time and space limitations and allow to mix events traditionally separated.

One of the example we discussed with students to document these phenomena is the changing of the traditional TV, modelled on a center that produces content, good to everyone at the same time, to a new model shaped by internet praxis: the *Telestreet* experience, a local TV edited by the community; or the *BookCrossing* experience, an infinite book exchange that invites people to share their most loved readings, leaving them in specified physical places.

After discussing this background with students, providing examples and case studies, we asked them to conceive new lines of cultural services according to the following guidelines:

- High level of interactivity;
- Innovation in the time scale and space model of fruition, breaking the constraints of the everyday schedules and calendars; and
- New content to go along with the traditional one.

The tasks required that users should be responsible for their own agenda, allowing them to develop flexible and personalised material and to share with others. A key requirement was the time factor: most of the cultural products and services are time sensitive and we pointed out that being flexible in time was critical. A relevant point that we asked to explore is the creation of a community of users: the projects should support with various means a virtual space for personal exchanging. Users interact through cellular phones, sending messages to web sites, internet and use local TVs.

The students were asked to identify the name of their application/event, design the brand identity, and produce the advertising campaign with cards, posters, banners, totems, TV spots and web sites. To prove the concept of their proposals they had to provide specific content to simulate the flow of interaction.

3   A selection of three projects

A selection of projects is now given with a short abstract.

Magazena

Magazena (*zena* means Genoa in dialect and the project title is a word game alluding to *magazzino* meaning warehouse in Italian) is a proposal of a creativity laboratory in an unused industrial building at the old port and a virtual community of music, video and digital art lovers. Users interaction takes place through P2P software for file exchange with home made audio and video as well as more mature products to show in the site show case. The mood of Genoa will be expressed by sampling city noises and industrial sounds from surrounding shipping activities. An editorial board from time to time set different themes. The collected material is mixed with live images and sounds, taken via

web cams located in busy city places, by DJ/VJ during the final show in the *Officina Magazena*, the building chosen for the event.

Remescià. Your ideas live.

Remescià means to mix and blend. Its concept is based on the idea of editorial contributions, to express the desire to share and participate. Anyone can submit a drawing sketch, an image, a photograph or even a sound in a *remescià* of feelings and sensations. The cross-media platform includes: the web site, more informative, integrated with a street TV channel, four physical locations in town, plus one virtual location in the net and a magazine: each media plays a diverse role.

The web site is more informative and becomes the virtual place for collecting materials. The interactive TV creates atmospheres and suggests imagery, where nothing is defined completely and everything is fleeting and transient. The physical locations are the places of the Genoa nights, devoted to the town's artistic life. The magazine enables contacts among travelers and expresses a strong call for participation. The material submitted is constantly re-shaped by an editorial board as life in the city flows. The traveler is invited to share the colors and sounds of the city.

Controsenso. Genoa as you have never seen it.

The goal is to reveal in poetry the everyday experience of city life of seeing-impaired people. Controsenso means contradiction or counter-sense and alludes to the choice of story telling through images what blind people see and perceive of the city. *Controsenso* conveys the strong feelings that blind people have about their city in terms of noise, smell, lights and shadows, paving and walls textures, that mean objects, places, people and shops: the thousands of details that go unseen at a conscious level for most of us.

Acknowledgements

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