Edinburgh University Island on Second Life - Brief

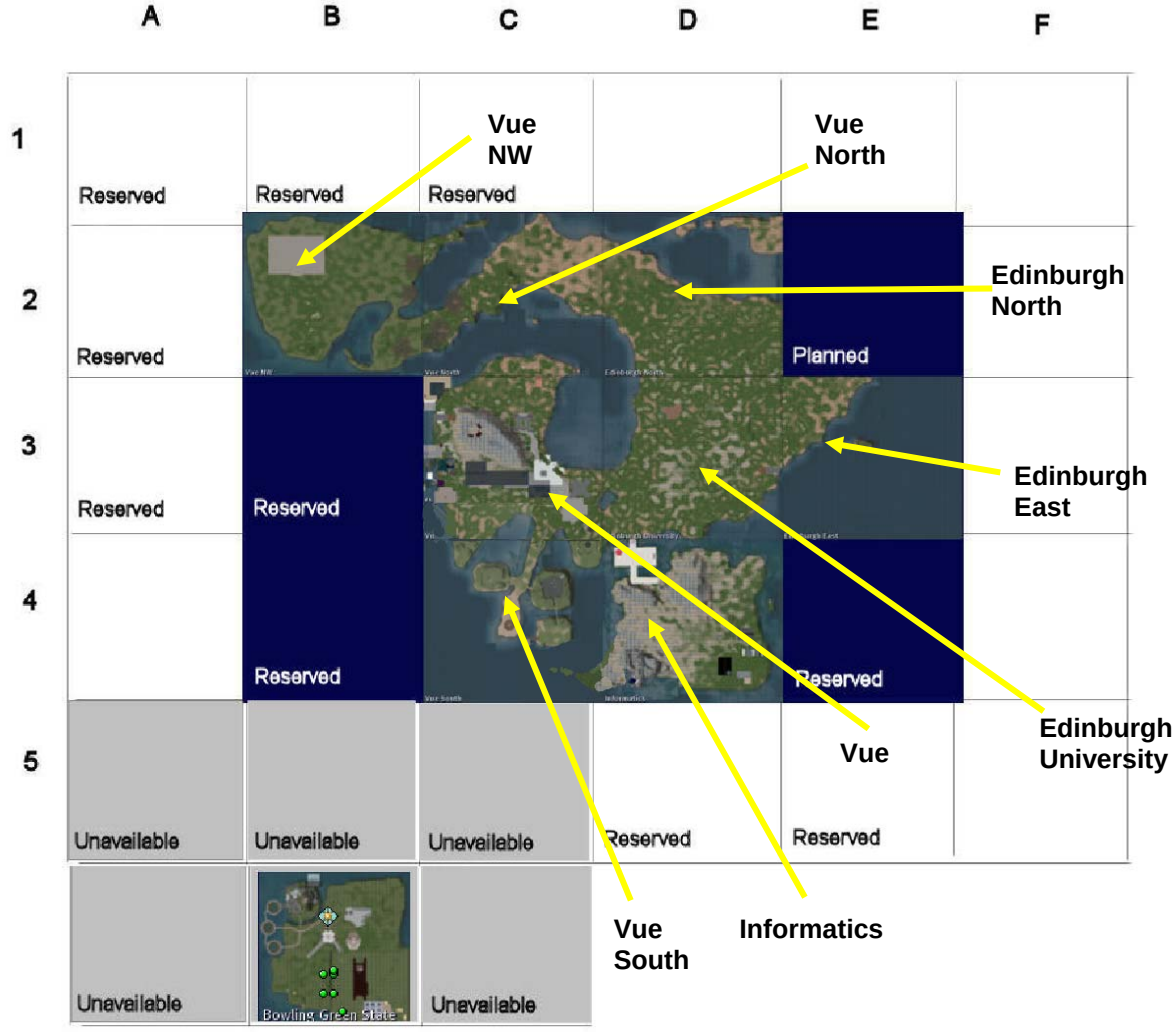
Overview & Current Status

The Vue region, a micro-continent in Second Life, is a collection of island sim squares owned by different departments or organisations within the University of Edinburgh. All current islands have been purchased with commitments to funding for 3 years from date of acquisition (mostly between April and July 2007).

The Vue Regional Planning Authority (VRPA) involving active members of the Vue community meets to plan for usage of the Vue shared islands, and discuss coordination issues for the region.

Currently, the shared areas are the two full sim regions; Vue and Edinburgh University and four open space regions; Vue North, Vue South, Edinburgh North and Edinburgh East. Technically an open space region supports 1,875 primitives for building rather than 15,000 in a full region, and four run on the same computer server allocation as a single full-sim region. All Vue regions are currently set to allow a maximum of 40 concurrent avatars to visit at the same time. Each sim square is 256m X 256m.

In addition, the School of Management owns Vue NW and the School of Informatics owns Informatics.



Outline plans are being discussed for square E2 to be purchased by Development & Alumni with a provisional name of Edinburgh Uplands, and square B4 has been suggested for possible use by Contextual Theology for their activities.

There are plans for related islands for Vue Associates external to the University (such as the National Museums of Scotland, and the Scottish Stem Cell Network) to be joined or placed physically close to Vue, extending the micro-continent.

Vue Region Zones

The zoning plan adopted by the VRPA allows, generally, for expansion of educational and e-learning related activities to the West, research and experimental activities to the South East, Vue Associates activities to the North and Development & Alumni and Outreach activities to the NW. Vue expansion is constrained to the South by other educational institution developments in Second Life.

Current Vue Areas

Vue Island has three focal points:

- Arthur's Seat – at 45m, currently the highest point on the micro-continent, with buildings on the Vue sim square limited to a height lower than this to give it visual impact and view points over the micro-continent.
- The Venue – a meeting area in the SE corner of Vue, with overflow capacity provided in the adjacent NE corner of Vue South and potentially in the SW corner of Edinburgh University.
- Vue Bay – a central waterway intended to give pleasant vistas from buildings around the bay and photo-opportunities over water.

The plan allows for a cluster of public facing facilities for academic departments around the bay on the West side of Vue Bay and The Venue, and central units, galleries, libraries, etc around the South and East sides of Vue Bay.

The current terra-forming principle is to have a long rise from the Venue (at around 25m, standard sea level being 20m in the sim) along the High Street towards the NE rising to a high point at Castle Rock.

Development Brief

Objectives

Overall island objectives:

- To assist in the creation of an international network of University of Edinburgh alumni (initially pilot groups of Informatics alumni) that utilises two way communication
- To have increased engagement with the University of Edinburgh community (initially pilot groups of Informatics alumni) through use of Web technologies
- To have created an University of Edinburgh alumni presence in Second Life
- To provide a virtual venue for collaboration, networking and promotion of the University

The next stage of the development of the Vue region is expected to be the creation of a Development & Alumni presence at The Venue and along an axis from the SE of Vue to the NE of Edinburgh Uplands (proposed island).

Island Purpose

Edinburgh University Island (and the proposed Edinburgh Uplands Island) will house the public face of the University's presence on Second Life. It has been purchased by Development & Alumni to be the starting point of the University's more formal development. It may extend onto Edinburgh Uplands Island (to the NE of Edinburgh University).

This area will initially be used with pilot groups of Informatics alumni and contacts and other interested parties connected to the University, but will in future be rolled out to other groups across Development & Alumni and the rest of the University.

As the Edinburgh University region is intended to be the first place in Second Life we direct external visitors it should have more seamless design than the other areas, with less experimentation and unpredictable dynamic change.

The space should be flexible enough so it can be used for:

- Large events – e.g. conferences, presentations or live streamed lectures
- Smaller meetings – e.g. discussion groups, networking sessions
- Informal gatherings – e.g. ad hoc meetings, bumping into people
- Social gatherings – e.g. reunions, parties
- Link up to real life – e.g. a virtual InSpace that links to the real life InSpace
- Tours – using the island to promote the University in general

Second Life works best when there are specific social engagements, e.g., events and meetings are planned, so it is essential that the island is used regularly for events. For example a regular weekly alumni meeting could be arranged (with varying times to enable people in different time zones to attend) where a representative of the D&A office various departmental staff are online and alumni can come along and chat with each other and the University representatives. Certain talks and lectures could also be streamed live to the region (subject to available technology and budget).

The island should look lively and busy so other units and groups within the University are encouraged to use it for meetings and classes when appropriate.

Key points

With regards to the design of Edinburgh University (and proposed Edinburgh Uplands) there are some suggestions and key points that should be taken into consideration:

a) The area to be developed is to include the zone from the Venue in the corner of Vue, Vue South and Edinburgh University, in a wedge incorporating all of Edinburgh University (a full sim), all of Edinburgh East (an open space sim), the Eastern half of Edinburgh North (an open space sim) and the proposed Edinburgh Uplands (a full sim).

b) It is suggested that the general terrain will be a gentle (2 degree) slope from the SE of Edinburgh University at 25m high through 35m height at the corner of Edinburgh University and Edinburgh Uplands going up to 45m at a precipice just short of the NE corner of Edinburgh Uplands.

c) The main thoroughfare on this slope could be called the High Street. It is suggested this street runs at a uniform 45 degree angle to make building positioning relatively straightforward.

d) A feature building, possibly suggestive of Edinburgh Castle's profile, could be located on the summit of this slope and could be called Castle Rock as a new focal point in the NE corner of Edinburgh Uplands. It could be a useable large space internally with adornments to give the external appearance and skyline features of the Castle.

e) Buildings in the Edinburgh University and Edinburgh Uplands area could be broadly suggestive of University of Edinburgh key buildings or areas. For example:
    - Old College and its Quad incorporating the Playfair Library and Talbot Rice gallery;
    - McEwan Hall;

- George Square and Library.

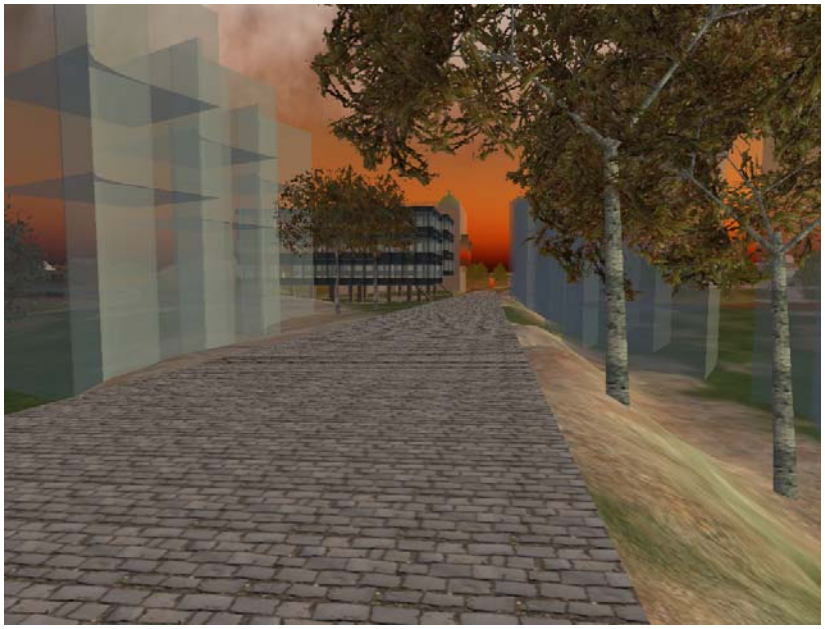
f) Edinburgh landmarks visible from or near to the University could also be included, such as Calton Hill or the new Scottish Parliament but where possible these should be scaled and have access and interiors which allow for practical uses.

g) From the main thoroughfare, it is anticipated that plots for a range of purposes will be allocated in strips with frontage onto High Street and then the main working areas dropping away from the higher terrain level going out to the coastline.

h) One suggestion is that to give variety, the South East side could slope more gently, and the North West side could be a steep precipice off the High Street allowing for access at street level, and a basement or downstairs for the buildings with rear access one floor or more lower to the West side.

i) Lighting should be incorporated to make the areas bright in Second Life night-time (which occurs every 6 hours).

A mock-up of "High Street " has been created by Austin Tate of Informatics on the "Edinburgh University" region with outline University and other buildings off it the road itself uses textures incorporating actual imagery of Edinburgh cobbles (by James Stewart of ACE). It is in place at a 2 degree slope and 45 degree angle across “Edinburgh University” to illustrate the possibilities. A number of phantom buildings are in place to suggest potential sightlines and building heights. Vue Development Second Life group members can build in these areas for experimentation.



Technical Considerations

- Use of low prim count buildings to reduce lag.
- Use few non-library (in-built, pre-downloaded) textures and use them frequently, rather than multiple new textures which need to be downloaded to all clients. This also cuts down lag.
- Keep use of new sound files in objects to a minimum to reduce lag.
- Only occasional use of active scripted objects such as particle and sound effects. Consider ways to centralise control of these for the region.
- Buildings should be easy to navigate, to move between outside and inside, up and down. Allow for fly lines in buildings as well as walking where possible.

- Ceiling heights should be a minimum of 6m, possibly 8m by default. This allows for the standard behind and above camera angle in Second Life, which otherwise is obscured by ceilings or walls.

- Use full permission objects, textures, scripts, etc. to allow for copy to inventory and sharing between Vue builders. Limit use of restricted materials to special features.

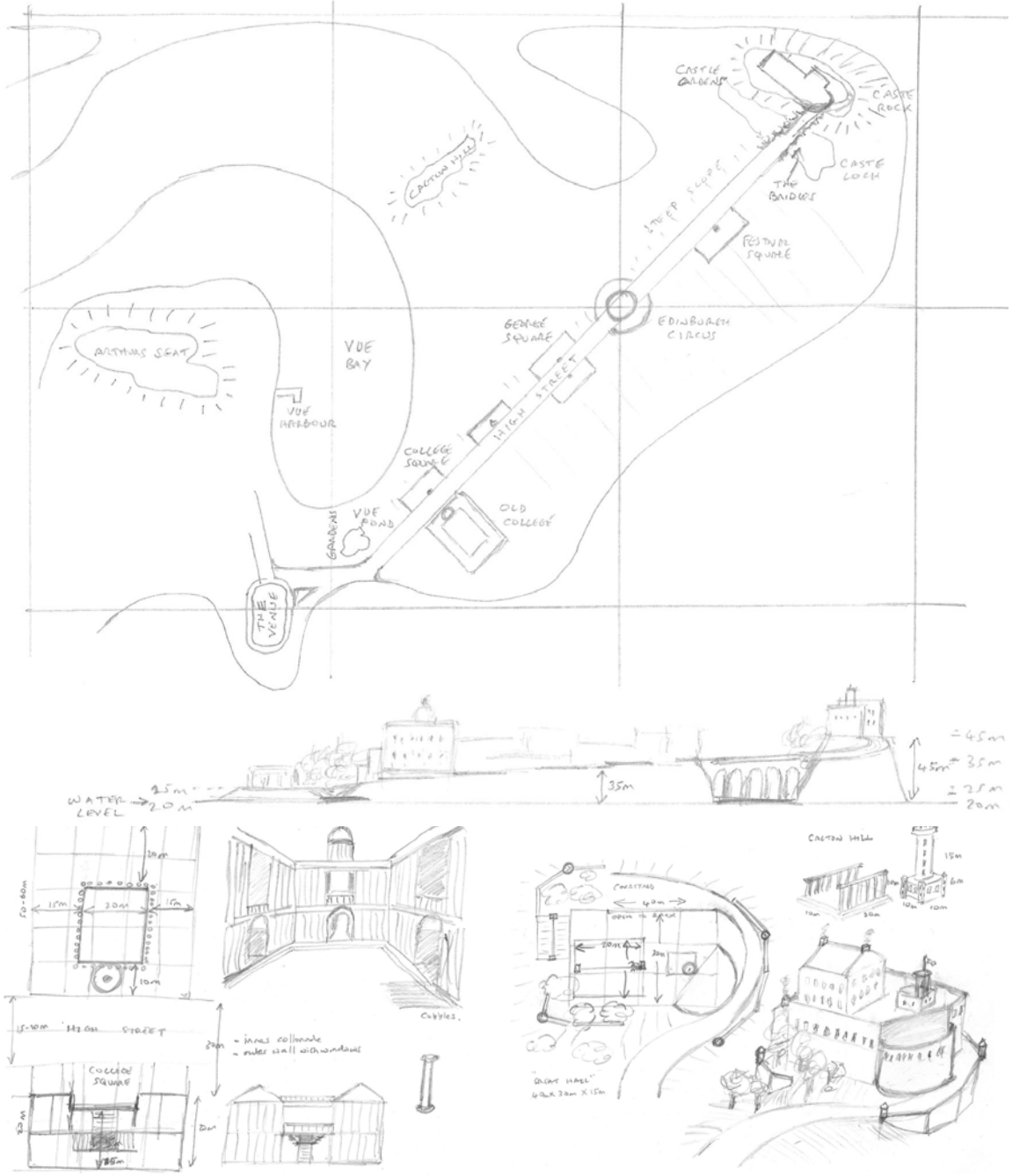
- Landscaping and Planting needs a consistent style e.g. Northern European plants and trees, Edinburgh cobbles, etc.

- Document all major buildings, rights to reuse each, current owner, position, etc.

- Use of Audio-Visual media could utilise a University level 24/7 TV and radio channel.

Possible design & layout

The below design has been proposed by Austin Tate for discussion at the VRPA:



Development Notes for this design

"The Venue" meeting space has an overflow area adjacent to it, to allow avatars to join even when the main meeting space is full and will not allow teleport to the region.

High Street has a number of "squares" to break up its length and allow for visually interesting buildings around these areas. To give variety and immediate visual clues, the zones are:

- Left Offset Square
- Right Offset Square
- Centralised Square
- Circus

To give variation for topography and building types, the SE direction off High Street has a gentle slope, the NW aspect is very steep so buildings may be entered from one floor up, and a lower level or basement is possible.

Castle on Castle Rock has functionally useful internal spaces.

Calton Hill is ornamental primarily, and used to give long interesting vistas fro the High Street and its buildings.

Potential Occupants of High Street Buildings

Final designs should allow for the occupancy and uses for the various buildings. Possible occupants should be identified in discussions with the Vue mailing list and the Vue Regional Planning Authority.

References/Bibliography

Heaton, J. 2007
Scripting Recipes for Second Life. *Heaton Research.*

Rymaszewski, M. Au, W.J. Wallace, M. Winters, C. Ondrejka, C. & Batstone-Cunningham, B. 2006
Second Life: The Official Guide. *John Wiley & Sons.*

Tapley, R. 2007
Designing Your Second Life. *New Riders.*

Weber, A. Rufer-Bach, K. & Platel, R. 2006.
Creating Your World: The Official Guide to Advanced Content Creation for Second Life. *John Wiley & Sons.*

Next steps – For internal use only

There are several possible avenues we can take with regards to development on the island:

1. Have some students build the island (paid) with the work being led by a professional architect.
2. Have some students build the island (paid) with the work being led by members of staff.
3. Get a professional architect to design and build the island.
4. Get a professional in-world development company or semi-professional in-world builder to design and build the island.

Approach 1

A proposal for the island master-plan has been developed by Bennetts Associates (the architects who designed the Informatics Forum). This suggests building a scaled down model of the Old Town, from the Royal Mile to George Square, with buildings being approximately Avatar height and certain ones acting as teleports into full size versions of the buildings, which can be used for meetings and events.

It is envisaged that the building project will be led by Bennetts whose master-plan for the island, including layout and general building concepts, will inform the building work.

The master-plan will then be enacted in Second Life by students (e.g., from Informatics or the Digital Design Course??). Students will be paid for their work (either an hourly rate or a set amount??)

The process for selecting student builders will either involve an open application process by interested students or by recommendation from members of staff.

There would be oversight by members of University of Edinburgh staff responsible for the budget, and liaising with the VRPA.

The student builders will have an initial meeting with the architect and staff members to discuss the concept. Regular progress meetings should also take place.

Objectives

- To involve students with the development of our island on Second Life.
- To create an exciting University presence on Second Life for alumni, visitors and staff and students alike.
- To promote our online activities and current students to alumni.
- To create a good news story by using a combination of the Informatics Forum architect and current students to build our island.

Timescales

Student builders should be recruited in the first few weeks of the new term and meet with Bennetts as shortly thereafter as possible.

As the students will also be studying the work should be done over a reasonable timescale, for example, three months.

Approach 2

This approach is similar to the first one except the overall design will be more heavily influenced by the VRPA and the student builders. It is likely to involve creating several Edinburgh/University landmarks as usable buildings as per the suggested approach.

It is envisaged that the building project will be led by members of University of Edinburgh nominated by the VRPA, who would make sure that work progressed at a reasonable pace.

The building work will be carried out by students (e.g., from Informatics or the Digital Design Course). Students will be paid for their work (either an hourly rate or a set amount??)

The process for selecting student builders will either involve an open application process by interested students or by recommendation from members of staff.

The student builders will have an initial meeting with the nominated members of staff to discuss the concept. Regular progress meetings should also take place.

Objectives

- To involve students with the development of our island on Second Life.
- To create an exciting University presence on Second Life for alumni, visitors, staff and students alike.
- To promote our online activities and current students to Informatics alumni.
- To create a good news story by using current staff and students to build our island.

Timescales

Student builders should be recruited in the first few weeks of the new semester and meet with the members of staff who are overseeing the project as shortly thereafter as possible.

As the students will also be studying the work should be done over a reasonable timescale, for example, six months.

Approach 3

A proposal for the island master-plan has been developed by Bennetts Associates (the architect who designed the Informatics Forum). This suggests building a scaled down model of the Old Town, from the Royal Mile to George Square, with buildings being approximately Avatar height and certain ones acting as teleports into full size versions of the buildings, which can be used for meetings and events.

In this approach the building project will be lead by Bennetts whose master-plan for the island, including layout and general building concepts, will inform the building work and one of their junior members will carry out the actual building work.

Objectives

- To create an exciting University presence on Second Life for alumni, visitors and staff and students alike.
- To promote our online activities to alumni.
- To create a good news story by using the Informatics Forum architect to build our island.

Timescales

As the work here would be done by a professional company working full time, we could expect the work to be completed perhaps a month after the final design is approved.

Approach 4

In this approach we commission a professional development company with Second Life experience, or a (semi-)professional in-world Second Life designer to design and build the structures on our island, using our brief and subsequent discussions as the basis for their work. Oversight would be by University of Edinburgh staff nominated by the VRPA.

Objectives

- To create an exciting University presence on Second Life for alumni, visitors and staff and students alike.
- To promote our online activities and current students to alumni.

Timescales

As the work here would be done by (semi-)professionals working to contract, we could expect the work to be completed perhaps two to three months after the final design is approved.