My experiences with "We Create Identity"

On a sunny day in late august, over forty students entered a building called "the Citadel", without a clue as to what would happen to them in the coming months. Up until now, they had never learned to create an identity, to make their artistic work public, or to present themselves to the world. Up until now, they were only able to do assignments that were fully specified, so their only input would be converting these specifications into a product. Little did they know, that this would completely change over the course of two months...

Showing your identity
In We Create Identity, we have learned a couple of valuable lessons. First of all, we have learned to think about what the criteria for a certain exercise are. In secondary school, we were used to getting assignments in which every detail is nailed down, but now al we get to know is what the end product must be. How you want to get there, and what the specifications of this end product are, is up to you. This forces you to think about the quality of your solution instead of making something that fits inside a certain mould, which I believe is extremely useful for later on, as often in real life there is no strict specification for a product, especially when you want to create something new and inventive.

Secondly, we have seen the merits of showing who we are as an individual to the world. An important way to show this is trough our blogs. Having and maintaining a blog has a couple of results, and the most important one to me is that it is a way to structure your thoughts, and reflect on what you learned from all the courses. Not only can you help myself by writing down what you learned, but it is also interesting to fellow students how others perceive the material offered in the classes.

Another advantage to having a blog is to you are able to display the exercises you have done for Creative Technology, but more importantly, it gives you a way to express how you have done them, and why. Again, this works in two directions: you help yourself by writing down what you have done, since it aids you in structuring your ideas and forces you to explore why you have made certain decisions, but others can also learn from the approach to tackling problems fellow students have taken.

The second way of showing who we are and what we stand for is by speaking out. Several times in this course, we have been given the opportunity to state our opinion in front of the class. While it may seem scary at first to speak out in front of an audience, and maybe even a bit unnecessary, because why would they all be interested in an opinion of somebody who has just started the programme, and knows next to nothing about it, I think it is a very valuable instrument to summarise your view on the one hand, and to gain a more balanced impression of the programme by hearing other peoples thoughts on the other hand.

Showing the identity of a group
While it is important to express who you are as a person, it might be more relevant for our future to be able to create an identity as a group. To practise this skill, we had to set up groups for our project: making an interactive video. Making yourself visible to the world as a group requires that every piece of work produced by this group is easily identifiable as such. This means that a group needs a logo and a name that stand out from the crowd. Since the theme of our video is nature, we decided to go with the name of our group in a "leaf font". We weren't really sure what would be a cool name, but we came up with two anagrams for "farmville" as a possible name: La Rev Film and Ravel Film. We democratically decided to go with the former one.

When you have established a name and a logo for your group, you will need a place to exhibit your work. To do this, using Google Sites is a very effective method, since it allows you to produce web content without the need to have a thorough understanding of HTML or other web languages, so you can focus your efforts on making your concepts visible to the world, instead of having to tinker with code. Another mayor advantage to "going Google" is that it is made extremely easy to collaborate on editing the web space with multiple people. You only need to type in everyone's Gmail, or google-enabled email address, and you are good to go.

Creating the story for our interactive video
After having created an identity for our group, we needed to produce the content for our interactive video. We started with a brainstorm session: what story do we want to tell, involving nature? Do we want a story about global warming, or do we want a slightly different approach to the theme nature? For this brainstorm session we used Google Docs, as it allowed us to simultaneously write down our ideas, whilst also documenting our concept development process.

Soon it became clear that we wanted a story that takes place in a small area, in which you can see the effects of your choices, instead of a story about global warming that affects the whole world, where it is much more difficult to show the consequences of the actions taken to the viewer. Tom came up with a park he knows in which decisions have to be made that always have both good and bad consequences. Everybody really liked the idea of having to choose between bad and bad instead of between good and bad. Up until this point we had established the issue in our story (you always need an issue for your story, or you won't have a story at all) but not a way to translate this issue into a video that is fun, coherent and has interesting interactivity.

To help us with telling our story we had to do a workshop storytelling, in which we had to put our story in a 12-step mould. The twelve steps are listed below:

1. ordinary world
2. call to adventure
3. refusal of the call
4. meeting the mentor
5. crossing the threshold
6. test, allies, enemies
7. approach to inmost cave
8. supreme ordeal
9. reward
10. road back
11. resurrection
12. return with the elixer

Because our issue was perfectly fitted to this 12-step format, we decided to use it as the set-up for our own story. We had already established that the motto for our video would be "enjoy nature", so it should come as no surprise that we came up with somebody who doesn't know how to enjoy nature at all as the main character: a computer games addict. Since he or she should have some connection to a park, we decided that the game would be Farmville. From here on out, we started to fill in the details. What would make him go to the park in the end? The farmville server, which crashes in the story, would be conveniently located in the park! What kind of enemy would he have? We don't know yet, let's call it the unknown evil force! What kinds of problems does he have to solve? Let's make some "problem area's", where the problem is shown from two points of view! And last but not least: What would be the road back & resurrection? He or she would become the new park manager for helping out so well!

At this point it might have been wise to make a detailed script for all of our scenes, but since we were all so eager to start filming, we only made a blueprint, and filled in the details during shooting. As we weren't really willing to think about the script all that much, a lot of crazy suggestions were offered, and some even made it into the final product. The best example of this is the scene where you meet the park manager: the only thing he says is "I'll be back", which of course is a famous catchphrase associated with Arnold Schwarzenegger. After this scene, you can guess whether he will actually return or not.

Shooting our interactive video
We had decided to film our story from the first person perspective, apart from the introduction, which is filmed from the third person perspective, as it helps with immersing the viewer / player into the story. Whilst we weren't really sure whether this would work out in the end, I think it has been a good decision. Another important thing you have to consider when filming is how to get your story across as well as possible. During filming we noticed some quirks in our story, so we had to redo a couple of scenes for the sake of coherency and clarity of the story. I think another thing that helped in telling the story in a clear way was the frequent use of costumes for our characters. While we have used some actors for more than one role, there is not a lot of room for mistaking one character for another, because they all wear distinctive clothing.

Video editing
The last thing that has played an important role in creating an interactive video was, for me, video editing. I didn't have a lot of experience with video editing in general, and none at all with the program we used for this particular project: Cyberlink Powerdirector. I decided to use a new program, as opposed to the one I already had experience with - Windows Movie Maker - because Movie Maker is simply too limited to portray the story in the way we wanted. Another mayor disadvantage to using Movie Maker is that it only accepts Microsoft formats, such as WMV or Microsoft Codec compressed AVI, while our cameras used other formats.

The most important tools that Powerdirector offered were, for this video, "Crop Video" and "Video Speed". "Crop Video" allows you to select a part of the frame of the video that you want to display. You can not only select a part of the frame for the total duration of the video, but can also have this frame adjust during playback. This means that you can zoom in our out during the video, while the original content had a consistent zoom level throughout. "Video Speed" can of course be used for slow-motion effects, as well as speeding up the video. When these techniques are used with care, they are a great way to emphasize the dramatic quality of certain events.

Where the program cannot help the director is in the area of music: a lot of work goes into finding fitting music for the video, as music defines the atmosphere of a video to a great extent. It can make or break your video. Without suitable music, the message will be lost on the viewer, or will be interpreted in an entirely different way.

Conclusion
I think it is safe to say the course "We Create Identity" has given me important lessons in how to create an identity, both as an individual and as a group. It has also given me the insight that you should think about the exercises you must do for yourself, instead of just following them blindly.