VRoma Reborn: Learning Latin and Roman Culture in a Virtual World

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of VRoma's founding, the three presenters propose to demonstrate a virtual teaching and learning community and the resources connected to it in a hands-on workshop. This workshop is intended (re)-introduce VRoma to a new audience, as the presenters guide attendees through the virtual world and a series of learning activities. Attendees will be expected to log into the virtual world from a laptop or tablet and invited to participate in hands-on activities, though they may also choose to observe.

Launched in 1996, The VRoma Project (www.vroma.org) was initially funded by a Teaching with Technology Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funded the construction of the virtual world, summer workshops for college and pre-college faculty, and the development and testing of a number of online teaching materials. The initial leadership of five classicists was joined by instructors at all levels who continued to build the virtual environment, contribute teaching resources, and incorporate VRoma activities into their courses. At last count, 145 instructors and an estimated 1500-2000 students have participated in the virtual environment in some capacity.

VRoma includes:

1. teaching and learning resources for classical languages and cultures created by teachers and aligned with the Standards for Classical Language Learning,

2. a well-established archive of images for teaching classics contributed by VRoma faculty, and

3. an interactive learning environment modeled on ancient Rome designed to create a sense of immediacy and intimate contact with the classical world.

Our teaching resources and images are widely used by both instructors and the general public, and the website consistently averages 1300-1500 unique visitors/day. Because the MOO technology that underlies the virtual environment uses relatively little bandwidth and relies on widely adopted protocols, it continues to be durable and accessible for users with internet access. For a detailed examination of the pedagogical and technological underpinnings of VRoma, please see Barbara F. McManus, "The Nature of VRoma's Virtual Environment " at http://www.vroma.org/help/virtualenvironment.pdf.

More than just a set of resources and a virtual teaching space, VRoma is a community of learners and scholars who continue to contribute both resources and pedagogical innovations. We are currently reassessing all aspects of VRoma in order to meet the needs of the new generations of learners and reconsidering how VRoma can be fully inclusive and equitable for generations to come. Feedback from recent workshops and demonstrations (e.g., at the 2021 ACL Summer Institute) indicates that the virtual world and online resources are still relevant and that there is untapped potential for both community building and language learning inherent in the unique nature of the online environment. For example, the text-based and interactive nature of the virtual world provides an ideal environment for language learning through imaginative verbal/textual play in both Latin and English. We are also exploring the potential for providing or supporting professional development activities and are eager for input from instructors and students about how we can update the MOO in ways that will meet the needs of today's learners.

Our proposed workshop will begin with an introduction to VRoma, followed by instruction in basic communication and navigation and several hands-on learning activities, for example:

1. an introduction to navigating virtual Rome and using interactive resources (such as "bots") via a treasure-hunt activity,

2. a role-playing activity designed to increase students' knowledge about the city of Rome and Roman culture, and

3. a quick round of *Indicium* ("Clue") designed to accompany Chapter 35 of the *Oxford Latin Course*.

These activities will demonstrate VRoma's capacity for teaching both languages and culture as well as how it can be combined with a webinar platform such as Zoom or GoToMeeting to enhance both in person and virtual learning. We will conclude the workshop with an opportunity for participants to provide feedback about how we can improve VRoma and what kinds of continued training activities we can provide. Our goal is for attendees to leave equipped to begin using VRoma and to join our community. The presenters will benefit by learning how we can continue to develop the platform to meet the needs of instructors and learners.