

Syncretia: a virtual geography for play

Elif Ayiter

Sabanci University, Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

This paper examines the strategies and theories involved in the creation of a virtual habitat; the island Syncretia located in the virtual world of Second Life®. The island is comprised of a series of narrative/play installations, which can also be considered as 'artistic environments'. Syncretia should be seen as an endeavour for providing a context for play, storytelling and metaphor; involving an examination of virtual geographies, cyberpsychology/presence studies, ludology and their relationship to *objets trouvés* or ready-made art/architectural objects which have been utilized to a substantial degree in the structuring of the visual/narrative language of Syncretia.

A virtual geography for playful activity

A concerned effort has been made by the artist to integrate Syncretia both with the geography as well as the climate of Second Life. Indeed, the island has not been conceived of as an artistic abstraction, superimposed in defiance of the virtual terrain upon which it has been rezzed but instead very much as a natural extension of the virtual geography itself.

Terraforming, a term usually associated with the hypothetical process of deliberately modifying the atmosphere, temperature, surface topography or ecology of extraterrestrial planets, acquires novel meaning and purpose in a virtual world: Bradshaw (Bradshaw et al 2001) discuss cyberforming terraspaces as early as 2001, thus giving agents a permanent foothold in a materially virtual world. Stating that, 'civilization begins when human beings find places to be, make these places their homes, then create ways to communicate and work together in their chosen locations', Bradshaw concludes that cyberspace will need to be built to fit the human sense of space; adding that as research increasingly couples virtual reality technologies with high-bandwidth connectivity, the perception of cyberspace as

'space' will become a reality [1]. Thus, terraforming, through which the virtual simulation of physical geographical elements can be attained, constitutes the primary tool of a building system which attempt to take advantage of vertical space through the usage of geographical strata.

While a considerable part of Syncretia is submerged under the ocean of Second Life, much else makes use of a steep central mountain as a structural backbone into which huge cantilevers have been embedded, raising parts of Syncretia high above water levels. There are 4 distinct domains, defined by compass directions; however thought has also been given to creating transitional spaces between these distinctive domains. Climate is brought into play whereby these have their intrinsic climactic properties, created through the implementation of various scripted weather systems.



Figure 1. Syncretia, North Shore. Stormy Weather

Presence and the avatar

Syncretia has been built as the home of the avatar Alpha Auer and as such acquires significance when considered within the framework of Presence studies: Presence is defined as a sense of 'being there' in a mediated environment (Jsselsteijn 2000). Lombard and Ditton (1997) define it as an illusion of non-mediation in which a user no longer perceives the display medium as a separate entity. A high level of

presence will help users remember a virtual environment as more of 'a place visited', rather than 'a place seen' (Slater et al., 1999) [2], and indeed Syncretia is intended as a repository of memories and associations both for her owner as well as her visitors. 'Presence' and its relevance to the immersive virtual experience is discussed by Mantovani and Riva [3] who challenge the notion that experiencing a simulated environment deals with the mere perception of its objective features; instead proclaiming that presence in an environment (real or simulated) means that individuals can perceive themselves, objects, as well as others not only as situated in that external space but as immersed in a socio-cultural web connected through interactions between objects and people, leading us to the paramount importance of the interacting agent within a virtual culture, i.e., the avatar.

A validation for realizing art work based upon the power of physical embodiment of the avatar and all appended structures such as virtual geography and architecture comes from Joerissen [4], who playing upon McLuhan's famous statement says that if soul is indeed 'form', the body is then the medium within which form becomes corporeal and as such the body becomes the very message which it carries. According to Joerissen, viewing avatars as mere representational agents in virtual realms has become increasingly problematic over the past decade. Instead a holistic approach which weaves together the human handler, the representation thereof and the medium / environment within which this representation materializes seems to be called for.



Figure 2. Syncretia: Public Baths

Art for experience, art for play

'Play is freedom. Play is extraordinary. Play is distinct from the ordinary both in locality and duration. Play is fun'. [5] Syncretia is a playful geography comprised of both amphibian and terrestrial strata, blending into one structural whole, into which objects and buildings have been integrated to create a playground of absurdity, frivolity and imaginative acts of embodiment which, whilst often drawing their metaphors from the physical realm often combine these with NPIRL [6] (Not Possible in Real Life) elements. For example a gym, built very much along the lines of a Real Life gym, nonetheless manifests distinctly un-physical attributes when it is constructed underwater and its exercise stations are placed along pipes which power the construct through an elaborate steam system. Similarly, the public baths of Syncretia present their users with Real Life-like bathtubs, albeit filled with virtual water which manages to stay within the bathtubs although these are situated in an amphibian environment embedded into the ocean of Second Life itself. The most noticeable construct on the island however is the alchemical power plant Citrinitas, structured to resemble a Real Life refinery. However, upon closer inspection this industrial complex materializes as an enterprise in which the virtual dross of several rusted trucks is expected to turn into gold and the astounding by-product of which are two instant rejuvenation spheres wherein avatars are asked to place themselves for a speedy anti-aging cure.

Huizinga [5] sets play and culture side by side, however insists that play is the primary force, since animal play pre-dates human culture. He does not define the place of play as being amongst all other manifestations of culture, but rather as an assertion of how far culture itself bears the character of play, thus setting an evolutionary framework for the concept. This idea is picked up by Brian Sutton-Smith in *Ambiguity of Play* (2001), drawing from the fields of animal play, psychology, folklore, literary criticism, biology and anthropology. The book considers seven major categories of play rhetoric that cover play as progress, addressing the claims of research into animal and child development; play as power in sports and games; play in the construction of identity through cultural activities such as festivals; imaginary play in art and literature; the self in play from the perspective of individual psychology; and the frivolous as a deconstruction of play.

Much inspiration as well as clarity of purpose has been attained from reading John Dewey on the experiential qualities of aesthetics and art [8]. In as synthetic a world

as the metaverse of Second Life®, where the bulk of art work presented is still housed in designated art spaces, such as galleries or museums, Dewey's concern for the separation of art work from its experiential functions seem well founded, particularly given the suitability of virtual worlds for an in-depth re-examination of the role of artistic output in (virtual) society.

Drawing attention to the modernist practice of relegating art work to rarefied but sterile repositories where they pursue an existence essentially cut off from everyday usage and appreciation, (e.g. museums), Dewey draws attention to cultures, ancient and contemporary, where aesthetic appreciation is inextricably bound with day to day usage, proposing that 'we do not have to travel to the ends of the earth nor return many millennia to find peoples for whom everything that intensifies the sense of immediate living is an object of intense admiration'. He suggests that the present task 'is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience', thus elevating art work from its current state of being the provider of mere 'transient pleasurable excitations' into once again becoming the powerful carriers of experience.

Play and the found object

While the geography of the island as well as the bulk of the architectural structuring upon it has been created by Alpha Auer, substantial amounts of objects, either found as free objects or purchased in Second Life, have been woven into this terrain and architecture. Indeed some of what can be experienced and seen at Syncretia has been added to the environment by friends and such additions have been kept in situ since the island is considered to be a living warm entity that welcomes such interventions: not an artistic object to be examined as such, but rather an immersive location for a 'Second Life' to fully be lived and participated in. Developing the theme of integration of objects created by others, metanomic activity is also brought into play through the integration of objects both found and purchased in Second Life. Thus, Syncretia can also be viewed as a virtual experiment in object trouvé or ready-made art:

In *Art and Agency* (1998) Alfred Gell expounds upon the found object as part of the process of artistic activity: the 'found object' or the 'ready-made' is where the artist does not so much 'make' as 'recognize the particular cognitive index of the object.'

Japanese Art is particularly rich in the use of found objects for artistic purposes, particularly in the use of natural objects. According to Gell Western cultures seem to have a more activist notion of artistic activity, whereas the Oriental approach esteems the 'quietist' mode of creativity where success attends those who open themselves to the inherent physiognomic appeal of the (naturally) found object. Thus, the use of the found object by Western artists, such as Duchamp, are less passive, with their selection being presented as pure acts of will on behalf the artist. Duchamp claimed that his ready-mades possessed 'the beauty of indifference', that is, the objects used in their creation were selected on the grounds that nobody could possibly imagine there could be any particular reason for them to have been selected in preference over others. However, having 'no reason' to select some 'thing' as an object of ready-made art, is in itself a reason, since it is motivated by the need to avoid selecting anything for whose selection some reason might be proposed. Consequently, even the purportedly 'arbitrary' ready-mades of the Dadaists, forced themselves on these artists 'who responded to the appeal of their arbitrariness and anonymity, just as the Buddhist landscape artists responded to their mutely speaking boulders' [9].

The integration of found objects into Syncretia is for the purposes of play. These 'ready-mades', which in some cases have been assembled out of pre-existing items or used as found, are toys used by Alpha and her friends in the creation of make-belief. Found objects, such as the rusted trucks whose transformation into gold is anxiously awaited as are the numerous other vehicles such as helicopters, hoverpads and cars scattered throughout the island and used for day to day transportation. Throughout the island planes which have taken sad, nose-dives mark previously incurred virtual plane crashes. A huge radio antenna is placed on the northern shore, and it is widely assumed this enables the inhabitant avatar population to obtain radio transmission from the BBC world service. Yet other found objects are pets, such as the horse and the swans on the eastern shore and of course, the Botanical Gardens which are created entirely out of purchased plants. It is the richness of the underlying 'metanomic' framework [10] resulting in a staggering array of commercially available output of every imaginable size, and shape and created for purposes ranging from the most utilitarian to the most sublimely bizarre which enables the realization of such a rich cornucopia of make-belief objects. This engenders situations which culminate in virtual memories through the creation stories and narratives - visually commemorated through a proliferation of virtual toys.

Conclusion

Syncretia has been built over a period of almost 2 years with structures and components added at diverse times and for diverse purposes. Over this period all and/or various parts of the island have been shown at international exhibitions and the island has been fully documented for these purposes. Although much has been added, as well as deleted, throughout this period in its essence the island has not really changed and is felt at this juncture to have outlived its original purpose of playful activity, having become overly familiar through repeated usage.

Given that one of the distinctive attributes of virtual artifacts is not only change and modification but ultimately a cycle of destruction and re-birth, Syncretia will not continue in its present incarnation for much longer. The avatar Alpha Auer will be undertaking a full re-building of the island in the fall of 2009, this time also incorporating elements of interactive/reflexive architecture, (deliberately omitted in its present incarnation), thereby enabling a newly created geography.

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