

Life and Art in Second Life

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Introduction

One of the many virtual worlds inspired by the cyberpunk literature movement, Second Life has attracted global attention since 2006 and counts today with millions of residents. Aligned with the Web 2.0 trends and considered by many as the best digital life at the present moment, the SL Metaverse gives flow to cybrid processes. In despite of the fact of not being a complete novelty — since 3D MUVES (Multi User Virtual Environments) and social networks have existed for more than one decade on the web — Second Life brings several new questionings and possible influences in language and personal relationships that cannot be despised.

The objective of this paper is to briefly explore the new possibilities for expression and interaction provided by Second Life and other virtual worlds on the web, especially in art, and to bring reflections about their probable influence in the future navigation interfaces on the web. Some selected artworks in Second Life will be pointed out to illustrate the paper.

Life in Second Life

Living and expressing the self in a world where one can either follow or break the laws of Physics is a power never experienced before by the flesh and bones man. However, in order to allow an avatar live that freedom in Second Life (SL), his/her physical body needs to be seated in front of a computer in the First Life (FL). Everything seems to be possible and extraordinary, but nothing really exists in SL if there will not be a physical human body behind it, feeding and supporting the brain in FL. We could say it seems that SL provides a platform that gives flow to *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) paradox.

It is still too early to conclude something deeper about SL or where this road leads. However, we are already feeling its effects and influences: SL is the 10th most popular virtual world, including online games (GigaOM, 2007). At any time there is an average of 30 to 40

thousand people connected and US\$ 1 million circulates daily *inworld*.

SL is the Stephenson's Metaverse (1993) first embodiment: totally immersive 3D environment where humans interact (as avatars) with each other (socially and economically) and with software agents of the cyberspace, which uses the physical world metaphor but without the physical limitations. SL is not a complete novelty since in reality it is a mix, a co-existence of everything that already exist — games, economy, social networks, etc. However, we believe that it initiates a new engaging way of interaction.

There are some important aspects to be considered in the life in SL. First, the balance between breaking and following the laws of Physics — it makes the environment much richer than if it were just one or the other, conveying the surprise effect constantly. Second, the simulation functionalities give a new dimension to language, like: flying, teleporting and the several new view functions. Third, SL is like a playground environment — it allows social interaction and toys. The more toys a playground has, the more attractive it becomes to different audiences. Fourth, the essence of SL is social. The most popular places are those that involve the social aspect — meetings, classes, shows, parties, etc. Fifth, cybrid (Beiguelman, 2004) processes are potentialized by SL: the life of a person in SL is extension of his/her life in FL and they complete each other, widening the field of action of the being. We are increasingly living a 'Digital Life' simultaneously with a 'Life Digital' (Iskold, 2007). A very interesting art exhibition that explores the convergence — through cyberspace — of real and synthetic places is the Mixed Realities (Turbulence, 2008). Another example is the company Fabjectory (2007), which creates statues of objects and avatars that exist in SL, transforming them in things in FL.

Finally, we believe that the key-aspect of SL is that it gives a bigger power to the individual than he/she has in FL: a) power over himself/herself (appearance,

movements, views, etc.); b) power over the environment; c) power not restrict to the virtual environment (due to the cybrid process) and; d) power allowed to lay people, which is very important to get mainstream.

We suggest that these functionalities in SL that affect the language and behavior *inworld* tend to affect the language on the Web and the daily language in FL, too.

Art in Second Life



Figure 1: Screenshot of the artwork SKINdoscope SL

Several activities are favored by the SL environment, like: design, architecture, programming, modeling, teaching/learning, and art. SL provides a rich environment that allows either the reproduction of traditional art or interesting new experimentations, possible only *inworld*. There are several galleries in SL that present art in traditional style, like gif images to be used on the residents' houses. However there are also galleries like Throwing Stones Gallery and other spaces that promote interactive installations in SL allowing to explore the new possibilities and potentialities that the environment provides.

Besides the search tool *inworld*, some blogs and magazines like SLArt (2008) present the art activities *inworld*. Some artworks that exemplify the new potentialities are: *A Rose Heard at Dusk*, by Adam Nash; *Abyss*, by Sunn Thunders and Rezago Kokorin; *FlowerBall*, by Douglas Story et al; *PleaseWakeMeUp Idler*, by Sasun Steinbeck; *Lumiere Noir's exhibit*, at SL4B; and *SKINdoscope SL*, by Martha Gabriel

(Figure 1). In the case of Lumiere Noir's exhibit, an artwork in form of a labyrinth amplifies the possibilities of interaction, if compared with FL. Many people are afraid of physical mazes due to the fear of getting lost or claustrophobia. In SL, an avatar can always fly or teleport immediately if he/her feels insecure. These abilities open for sure new channels for experiences and sensations that can be studied deeper.

Conclusion

Although in some ways SL is not a novelty as discussed before, in another way it initiates a new way of interaction. On the other hand there are still several limitations that prevent the SL language of getting mainstream, like: the need of appropriate hardware, the lack of access via a web browser, and the lack of social control, for example. Although these limitations are likely to be overcome in a near future, we are not able to predict if SL will keep being alive or not. Maybe other virtual worlds will become more popular or even overcome it.

However, we believe that SL has founded a new language and way of interaction, even if it doesn't survive. In the same way that ICQ has been overcome by MSN and other instant messenger systems, ten years ago it founded the instant messenger language, which is still alive, used and influencing people's daily language.

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