

ARCHIPELAGOS OF ART

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The paper considers the rapidly growing metaverse and its implications for a post industrial society with particular reference to the new art forms specific to this new medium.

Today the internet is the backbone of the global economy and without it our industrial infrastructure would collapse within hours, but a decade ago people would ask “Why do I need a website?” Today nobody asks that question, they may prefer a Blog or Facebook page but whatever format they choose an online presence is a recognised door which connects to other people. Today the contemporary question is “Why do I need a virtual world?”

During the period the web came to dominate the media landscape there was also a parallel development of virtual environments, commonly seen in the ubiquitous games for the Sony Playstation or Microsoft's X-Box. For most children in the western world these games have come to dominate their leisure time, gone are the toy soldiers and masquerade of 'cowboys and indians' the arena is now a virtual theatre of war where every kill is a point.

There is however a lesser known type of virtual environment which is distinguished from the aforementioned games- which are characterised by agreed movements, a defined outcome and usually in terms of one player or team winning. In contrast these other virtual environments are self authored and initially present an empty world, a *tabula rasa* where an author can create whatever he or she wants and if rules are to be used that is the authors choice.

The example of Second Life (Linden Lab 2005)[1] provides a good introduction to the possibilities of self authored virtual worlds and there are now many similar examples in the rapidly growing worlds of Open Simulator [2] where the term metaverse is used to describe a collection of virtual worlds - rather like continents which are connected to each other with the ultimate goal of creating an internet scale virtual environment network.

The word which most characterises the virtual environment is immersion, virtual environments are immersive environments. When we read a novel we immerse ourselves in the story and empathise with the struggles of the heroine or anti-hero and the dramatic arc of their lives on the page. For the duration we allow ourselves a willing suspension of disbelief in that while we know the events in the story are not real we allow ourselves to believe they are. The same pertains to cinema, particularly in the genres of the thriller and horror, these are ancient pleasures which earlier generations had similarly sought in theatre, opera and epic poetry.

Imagine then that instead of sitting in a comfortable chair, fingers tense with fear, watching and empathising with the on-screen character – that instead you are the character! This experience is already familiar to children in their war gaming where the psychological response to such immersion, the feeling of actually being there is very intense.

The rapid growth of virtual environments has prompted psychologists to ask why? What is the attraction? The evidence from surveys is complex, [3] but anecdotes suggest, for the game players at least

that a common reason is “Because real life sucks”, a sad finding perhaps but most of us would recognise some truth to this and further we would not be surprised that a university educated supermarket shelf stacker would, rather than stacking shelves, be a knight on horse back with his damsel avatar by his side leading fellow warriors into battle to defeat a deadly enemy? Oh but that is only fantasy you say, he is dreaming and indeed he is. But isn't escapism the *sine qua non* of the novel and cinema? Recollect the rebuke at the end of the nineteenth century when people remarked of a friend “Oh she is clearly not well, she spends all day at home reading French novels.”

Escaping into virtual worlds offer an escape for those who find the real world insufficient to their needs and while living a surrogate life as a medieval knight might not be your choice, a more disturbing ontological question is “If you could live in a world that was just the way you wanted it to be, with specifications you'd chosen, customized and personalized to meet your every need and fulfil your fondest desires, would you spend all your time there? Or would you prefer to stay here, in the real world?” [4]

Fundamental to this enterprise is that the avatar is an abstraction of its owner and frequently a person's avatar is an idealised visual representation of them self, a remodelling based on vanity but also, with the potential for some, to bring a beneficial change in how they can socially interact.

We discriminate on the basis of sex, race, colour, we judge people on their looks, their able bodied-ness and their age. If the base causes for our prejudice could be removed, to create a more level social playing field, would this correspond to an improvement in social well being?

In a virtual world the avatar of an isolated house bound eighty year old person could look like a thirty year old who could – in world, talk and interact as an equal again. A hospital bound patient, a paraplegic, the extremely shy, those without the power of speech anybody who can use a mouse can find in a virtual world a new place for social interaction. Let us be clear, this is not an either or situation; nobody lies in bed reading French novels all the time.

War gaming is the first and seminal example of online role playing, less complex than Aeschylus' reworking of Herodotus it is also the simplest because players don't need a 'character', they merely require to know their allowable moves and how to take an opponent out of the game. But if the motivations are not as simple as kill or be killed how is dramatic structure established? Actors in theatre and film are aided by a script describing the actions, plot and characters, in role play these crucial narrative devices, excepting the character, are not available. This is the realm of the highly literate paragraph role players where a loose plot is perhaps agreed in advance but all the dialogue is written on the fly.

Clearly the 'killer app' of virtual worlds is interactions with other people and while the potential for duplicity is a given we also know that we are in the realm of theatre. As Vernant remarked “In the case of Dionysus, the mask disguises him as much as it proclaims his identity.”[5] The avatar is our mask and like the mask in the Baccic rituals and the festivals of Carnival it offers a temporary release from the mundane. The mask offers liberation, a device for fiction which explains why role play of a sexual nature is common allowing individuals to explore psychological danger from a safe distance.

Other aspects of virtual worlds offer new opportunities for visual artists particularly photography, animation, machinima and virtual sculpture. The virtual camera presents an entirely new tool for a new subject, the *mise en scène* of virtuality. In parallel with still photography there has been the rapid growth

of machinima, the use of real-time 3D computer graphics rendering engines to create animated cinematic productions which will in the coming years transform advertising, promotional video and cinema.

There is another genre of art which is unique to virtual worlds, an art of such originality that it rarely reaches the museum visitor. Part of its description would be virtual sculpture, abstract compositions of prims, textures, particles, transparency, phantoms and physics where space itself is a plastic dimension. One struggles for a language to describe these conceptual and immaterial works in which an amalgam of technical finesse and aesthetic sensibility combine to demonstrate a pure digital craft .

Many virtual world artists use scripted code for contributory effect in abstract works to describe possibilities, others embrace the language of virtuality with formal composition and audio while others use virtual art to reflect upon the real world. Social, dramatic, aesthetic and conceptual the virtual worlds are ground breaking, the avant garde is alive and well and living on the archipelagos.

References and Notes:

1. *Second Life*, <http://secondlife.com> (accessed September 2011).
2. *Open Simulator*, <http://opensimulator.org> (accessed September 2011).
3. C. Ridings & D. Gefen, "Why People Hang Out Online," http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue1/ridings_gefen.html (accessed September 2011).
4. M. Treder, "Life in a Virtual World: Ethical Technology," <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/treder20100724> (accessed September 2011).
5. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Features of the Mask in Ancient Greece," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (New York: Zone Books, 1988).