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# Liberate Your Avatar: The Revolution will be Social Networked

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## ABSTRACT

This paper brings together the practice-based creative research of artists Charlotte Gould and Paul Sermon, culminating in a collaborative interactive installation that investigates new forms of social and political narrative in multi-user virtual environments. The authors' artistic projects deal with the ironies and stereotypes that are found within Second Life in particular. Paul Sermon's current creative practice looks specifically at the concepts of presence and performance within Second Life and 'first life', and attempts to bridge these two spaces through mixed reality techniques and interfaces. Charlotte Gould's *Ludic Second Life Narrative* radically questions the way that users embody themselves in on-line virtual environments and identifies a counter-aesthetic that challenges the conventions of digital realism and consumerism.

These research activities and outcomes come together within a collaborative site-specific public installation entitled *Urban Intersections* for ISEA09, focusing on contested virtual spaces that mirror the social and political history of Belfast. The authors' current collaborative practice critically investigates social, cultural and creative interactions in Second Life. Through these practice-based experiments the authors' argue that an enhanced social and cultural discourse within multi-user virtual environments will inevitably lead to growth, cohesion and public empowerment, and like all social networking platforms, contribute to greater social and political change in first life.

## Keywords

Embodiment, telematics, performance, presence, gender, social networking, politics.

## 1. NEW FORMS OF SOCIAL NARRATIVE

Throughout the 1990s media art was dominated by interactivity and interface design. However, through the increasing importance of user generated content via public networks in both online and offline contexts the contemporary media art discourse now finds itself in an ever increasing socially networked environment. This paper investigates how the experience of tactility and physicality, as explored in the creative practices of Charlotte Gould and Paul Sermon, makes both the participants/performers and the artists/directors more susceptible to new forms of social narrative, yet also offers altered ways for generating effective responsive

experiences. The authors' artistic projects deal with the ironies and stereotypes in multi-user virtual environments such as cultural identity, gender roles, digital consumption and virtual desire. Their work aims to specifically utilise alternative interactive functionality and techniques in multi-user virtual environments that allow the participants to embody performer roles to interact and direct new social networked creative narratives by their communication, presence and movements.

## 2. PAUL SERMON'S TELEMATIC PRACTICE

Paul Sermon's work of the early 1990s explores the emergence of user-determined narrative by bringing remote participants together in a shared telepresent environment. Through the use of live chroma-keying and videoconferencing technology, two public rooms or installations and their audiences are joined in a virtual duplicate that turns into a mutual space of activity.

This work locates itself in the telematics discourse and has continually drawn on the concepts of user-generated content and communication. The audiences form an integral part within these telematic experiments, which simply wouldn't function without their presence and participation. Initially the viewers seem to enter a passive space, but they are instantly thrown into the performer role by discovering their own body-double in communication with another physically remote user on video monitors in front of them. They usually adapt to the situation quickly and start controlling and choreographing their human avatar. Nevertheless, because the installation is set up in the form of an open accessible platform, it offers a second choice of engagement: the passive mode of just observing the public action, which often appears to be a well-rehearsed piece of drama confidently played out by actors. Compelling to watch, it can be a complex issue to discover that the performers are also part of the audience and are merely engaging in a role. The entire installation space then represents two dynamic dramatic functions: the players, controllers, or puppeteers of their own avatar, absorbed by the performing role; and the off-camera members of the audience, who are themselves awaiting the next available slot on the telematic stage, soon to be sharing this split dynamic. However, the episodes that unfold are not only determined by the participants, but by the given dramatic context. As artistic creator, Paul Sermon is then designer of the environment and, consequently, 'director' of the narrative, which

is determined through the social and political milieu that he chooses to play out in the telepresent encounter.

Paul Sermon's more recent creative practice looks specifically at the concepts of presence and performance within Second Life and what the authors call 'first life', and attempts to bridge these two spaces through mixed reality techniques and interfaces. The work further examines the notion of telepresence in Second Life and first life spaces through a blurring between 'online' and 'offline' identities, and the signifiers and conditions that make us feel present in this world. This artistic practice questions how subjectivity is articulated in relation to embodiment and disembodiment. It explores the avatar in relation to its activating first life agent, focusing on the avatar's multiple identifications, such as gender roles, human/animal hybrids, and other archetypes, identifiable through visible codes and body forms in Second Life.



**Fig 1. Peace Games by Paul Sermon, Kunsthalle Vienna May 2008**

While there is a shift of emphasis from Sermon's previous telematic projects here, there are significant parallels between the earlier networked video experiments and the presence and absence experiments he is developing in Second life. Together these aspects of telepresence and the merger of first and second life aim to question fundamental assumptions of the Second Life phenomenon.

### **3. CHARLOTTE GOULD'S NARRATIVE PRACTICE IN SECOND LIFE**

Since 2007 Charlotte Gould has developed a number of site-specific works using Second Life, which enter into a discourse on the identity politics of online virtual environment aesthetics. These works seek to question the trend in visualisations of environments and avatars that incontrovertibly conform to the conventions of ultra-realism and 'super-humanism' in multi-user virtual environments, looking for an unconventional aesthetical paradigm counter to the stereotypes that prevail in Second Life. These alternative avatars possess a hand made, imperfect, puppet-like quality as opposed to the formulaic Barbie and Ken 'body-beautiful' archetypes that abound. In 1995 Sherry Turkle argued that the experience of inhabiting a virtual world can be liberating, as the user is unbound from the shackles of their own body, gender or image and can be whoever they choose. [10] However, since the introduction of multi-user virtual environments it would appear that the majority of Second Life users have chosen to accentuate the sexual signifiers of the 'perfect body'. Turkle went on to say that, when inhabiting an avatar of a different gender to

the first life user, stereotypical choices are often made [10], which affirms that gender politics as well as aesthetics are in play.

While the majority of users appear to be journeying through the 'uncanny-valley' [7] on a quest for super-human aesthetics, and the buildings and landscapes they create similarly strive to replicate our first life environment, there is an implicit irony when we build virtual roads we do not use because we can fly or even teleport, and fit roofs and windows in a landscape where it never rains. Moreover, this landscape is not so dissimilar from our current first life hyper-reality that Umberto Eco described in the mid 1980s as a culture obsessed with fabricating environments and experiences in an effort to create a space that is better than real (Eco 1986) - think of Venice Las Vegas, urban beaches or the proliferation of celebrity plastic surgery, and the discourses of first and second life become increasingly blurred. In her current practice-based research, Charlotte Gould produces work that responds to and enhances a first life experience through a counter-culture landscape in Second Life, relying on alternative hand drawn textures and low-tech handmade objects such as props, costumes and body parts. Working with XML based feeds from avatar to controller, these experiments make use of motion tracking to develop a link between first life participant and avatar, where the position of the person in first life triggers the movement of the avatar in Second Life. The user's body controls the puppet-like avatar that appears to intuitively wander the virtual landscape in response to the first life puppeteer.



**Fig 2. Motion tracking movement of avatar, Charlotte Gould ISEA August 2009**

Due to the urban setting of the installations, these augmented Second Life interfaces are designed for large format public video screens. The designated public space opened up by these experiments further explores innovative and creative ways of engaging with the public in an urban environment. Through the mixing of realities of the virtual and the real, users can then explore alternative networked spaces and develop unique narrative events. The work encourages ludic urban play for people of all ages and explores how enjoyment and social interaction can be enhanced in this context.

The creative and cultural potential that large format urban screens offer is becoming increasingly more evident as more screens appear in the urban landscape. These emerging technologies and networked infrastructures impact on the way that the public

interacts within the urban environment, both with each other and with the space - potentially allowing the user to engage in an active role rather than passively consume this new digital content. Through her work Charlotte Gould looks to rediscover and reclaim the urban screen as a space for critical discourse and political debate. Using action research, documentation and observation of these urban media spaces, Gould uses everyday practices to inform further research. [3] The creative opportunities that digital and pervasive media offer for the public to actively engage and contribute content to the urban screen extends beyond the notion of the 'user-generated'. As Matt Adams from Blast Theory argues, instead we should talk about public created content, where accessibility of new technologies opens up the potential for new creative content, as Barthes concludes the public completes the work through the creation of their unique narrative. [1]

#### **4. THE UNDERPINNING CONCEPTS OF THE AUTHORS' COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE**

The aim of the authors' current collaborative practice is to critically investigate how online participants in three-dimensional worlds, Second Life in particular, socially interact within innovative creative environments, appropriate these cultural experiences as part of their everyday lives, and question what is 'real' in this relationship. The collaborative practice brings together ethnographic and creative practice-based methods that identify and develop original, innovative interactive applications, interface design and necessary cultural and sociological knowledge. Each of these will help shape and define the emerging online 'metaverse' [9] society, significantly contributing to the quality of both first and second life.

The ontological questions associated with identity in virtual reality, be it online or offline, have been at the centre of the contemporary media arts and science debate for the past three decades, and this discourse continues to dominate the annual conference themes of Ars Electronica Linz, the Transmediale Berlin and SIGGRAPH USA. The recent rapid increase in users of multi-user virtual environments has now brought them under this microscope, noticeably by inclusion at Ars Electronic 2007 in 'Second City', a festival strand that paralleled first and second life in mixed-reality artworks, scientific experiments and theoretical debate. This creative practice and debate is firmly rooted in the discourse of semiotics, reflecting a poststructuralist debate from the linguistic origins of F. de Saussure's notion of reality as a construct of language (Saussure 1964) to Jacques Lacan's construction of identity through the mirror image of the self (Lacan 1949), and Jean Baudrillard's concept of reality as 'Simulacra' or simulations of it. [2]

So as to explore this emerging relationship between first and second life, Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould have developed interfaces that focus on the interaction and exchange between online and offline identities through social practices, such as performance, narrative, embodiment, activism, place and identity construction. Their collaborative experiments seek to question whether Second Life is a platform for potential social and cultural change - appropriated as a mirror image of first life. By consciously deciding to refer to this image that is mirrored as 'first' life rather than 'real' life, the authors' central question poses a paradox in Second Life when we consider Jacques Lacan's

proposition that the 'self' (or ego) is a formulation of our own body image reflected in the 'mirror stage.' [6] However, there is no 'mirror stage' in Second Life. This would suggest that the computer screen itself is the very mirror we are looking for, one that allows the user to formulate her/his 'second self'. Although an 'alter ego', this is nonetheless a self that can have an engaged social identity.

In Second Life you create an avatar that lives out an online existence. There are no set objectives, you can buy property, clothing, accessories, furnish your home, modify your identity, and interact with other users. This online community has grown to seventeen million residents since launching in 2003, generating a thriving economy. However, while the virtual shopping malls, nightclubs, bars and beaches often reach their user capacity, there is a noticeable lack of creative and sociological modes of attraction. Consequently, the growing media attention around Second Life warns that this expanding community has become ambivalent and numbed by their virtual consumption, and there is an increasing need to identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability.

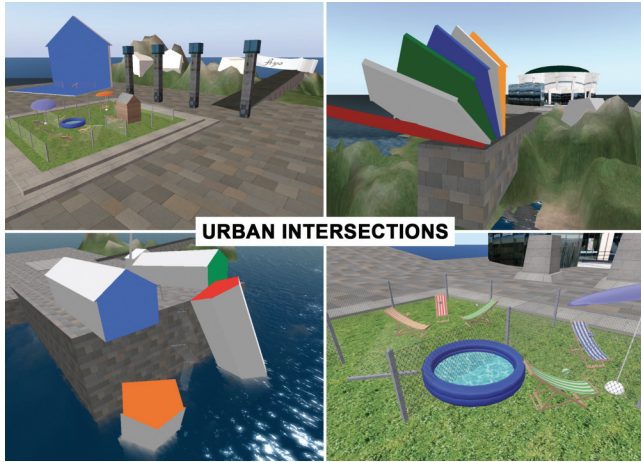
However, when the 'Front National', the far right French political party of Jean-Marie Le Pen opened their Second Life headquarters in January 2007, the Second Life residents reacted in a way that would suggest they are far from complacent avatars wandering around a virtual landscape, and that they possess a far greater degree of social conscience than the consumerist aesthetics of Second Life suggest. Through prolonged mass virtual protest the centre was razed to the ground in the space of a week and has not returned since. The reaction to the Le Pen Second Life office suggests that Second Life is indeed a platform for potential social and cultural change. And there is a hidden desire and ambition to interact and engage with this online community at an intellectual and creative level that transcends the collective 'I shop therefore I am' [5] apparentness of its community. Moreover, Second Life could then influence our first lives. As the landmass and population of Second Life expands at an ever-increasing rate it is clear that essential research into the intersection and interplay between first and Second Life, and both new and old patterns of consumption, cultural production and sociability is urgently needed.

#### **5. CROSSING THE SOCIAL DIVIDE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE PRACTICE**

These research activities and outcomes have now come together within a collaborative site-specific public installation entitled *Urban Intersections* focused on contested virtual spaces that mirror the social and political history of Belfast as a divided city, and presented at ISEA09 (International Symposium of Electronic Arts 2009). This collaborative project specifically reflected on the ironies of contested spaces, and stereotypes in multi-user virtual environments, exposing an absurd online world that consists of perimeter fences, public surveillance, and national identity. These futile efforts to divide and deny movement and social interaction were an uncanny reflection of the first life urban and social landscape of Belfast. So whilst it is possible to defy and transcend these restrictions in Second Life where we can fly, teleport and communicate without political constraint and national identity, we can question the need for such social and political boundaries



enforced in first life and consider the opportunity to initiate social change in first life through our Second Life experience.



**Fig 3. Urban Intersections Sermon & Gould at ISEA Belfast August 2009**

The installation was located on the regenerated landscape of the Waterfront Plaza Belfast, directly outside the newly developed concert hall building. This utilitarian environment was used as a stage set to represent an augmented garden that explored the concept of boundaries and territories, a virtual plaza encapsulated by the ironies, contradictions and obscurities of a divided city, and a metaphor of Belfast's social history. As the participants walked through this urban landscape, both first and second life inhabitants came 'face-to-face' on screen, in the form of a live digital mural projected on the façade of the Waterfront building. This mural formed the central focus of the installation and immediately spoke of the infamous painted murals on houses across West Belfast. Those depict a deep political divide, but post-conflict society now refers to them as a stark reminder of recent troubles, and thereby maintaining the peace that now prevails. In a city such as Belfast it would be impossible to evade such references when projecting images onto a building, as though the project itself were projected onto the gable end wall of a house on the Falls Road or the Shankill Estate.

The local audience formed an integral part of this installation that relied on user interaction and aimed to transcend boundaries through user-generated storytelling and memory building in a post-conflict society. The complete installation utilised three interface techniques. Charlotte Gould's motion tracking interface allowed visitors in Belfast to wear a large puppet-like copy of her unique avatar head. Covered in an array of LED lights that were tracked, participants could then control the movements of the Second Life avatar as a means of alternative navigation through a maze of chain-link garden fences. Paul Sermon's interface combined first life visitors and Second Life avatars within the same live video stream. By constructing a blue chroma-key studio in Second Life it was possible to mix live video images of online avatars with the audience in Belfast, enabling these participants to play and converse on a collaborative video stream simultaneously displayed in both first and second life situations. The third interface was developed by sound and media artist Peter



**Fig 4. Proposed Second Life projection for ISEA Belfast 2009**

Appleton, whose contribution included a barbecue on the Waterfront plaza that simultaneously controlled the conditions of an identical Second Life barbecue. Through a series of light and heat sensors it was possible to relay commands to the online situation, so that when the first life barbecue was lit so too was the Second Life barbecue and as food started to cook and brown so did its online duplicate. All these interfaces referred to the domestic garden and the infamous Belfast perimeter fences. The aim was to break down these boundaries through social interaction that prevailed, be it through a video portal, a didactic maze or over a grilled sausage.



**Fig 5. Barbecue in first life controlling Second Life barbecue, Peter Appleton ISEA09 Belfast, August 2009**

## 6. PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE SOCIAL NETWORKING ON AN URBAN SCALE

The collaborative work of Sermon and Gould will continue to explore the wider social consequence of multi-user virtual environments, be that on Second Life or the platform that supersedes it. Whichever is the case, it is essential that multi-user

virtual environments such as Second Life move away from the imbedded Linden dollar economy that intrinsically defines its capitalist principles and growth. The *Urban Intersections* project has already contributed to this paradigm shift by alternatively locating itself on an OpenSim, currently available as a derivative open-source beta version of Second Life that locates its island sims on geographically distributed servers. Following a similar model to the WWW, this fundamental network architecture shift moves away from the centralised San Francisco Linden Lab monopoly to an open source networked model, and is in many ways reminiscent of the VRML architecture of the mid 1990s and its collective ideology. This distributed content and ownership will inevitably lead to social growth, cohesion and public empowerment, and like all social networking platforms, contribute to greater social and political change.

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