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CREATING SECOND LIVES: READING AND WRITING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES
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LIBERATE YOUR AVATAR

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Abstract of the paper

An interactive public video art installation incorporating Second Life users in a real life environment. Located on All Saints Gardens, Oxford Road, Manchester, for the Urban Screens Festival, October 12th 2007 from 5pm to 6pm.

The merged realities of 'All Saints Gardens' on Oxford Road, and its online three-dimensional counterpart in 'Second Life' will, for the first time, allow 'first life' visitors and 'second life' avatars to coexist and share the same park bench in a live interactive public video installation. Entering into this feedback loop through a portal between these two parallel worlds this event exposes the identity paradox in Second Life. 'Liberate your Avatar' examines this new crisis and reflects the history of 'All Saints Gardens', relocating Emmeline Pankhurst as an avatar within 'Second Life' where she remains locked to the railings of 'All Saints Gardens'.

<http://www.paulsermon.org/liberate/>

SecondLife has grown to eleven million residents since launching in 2000, generating a thriving economy. However, whilst the virtual shopping malls, nightclubs, bars and beaches often reach their user capacity, there is an increasing need to identify new forms of interaction, creativity, cultural production and sociability. When the 'Front National', the far right French political party of Jean-Marie Le Pen opened their SecondLife headquarters in January 2007, the SecondLife 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 consumer aesthetics of SecondLife suggests. Through prolonged mass virtual protest the centre was raised to the ground in the space of a week and has not returned since. The reaction to the Le Pen SecondLife office begs the question: is SecondLife a platform for potential social and cultural change? And is there 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'¹ apparentness of its community? Moreover, does SecondLife influence first lives? And therefore could our first life existence start to reflect our SecondLife conscience as this community continues to grow and develop into the future? As the landmass and population of SecondLife expands at an ever-increasing rate it is clear that essential research into the intersection and interplay between first and SecondLife, and both new and old patterns of consumption, cultural production and sociability is urgently needed.

¹ The term *I shop therefore I am* was used by artist Barbara Kruger in 1998 as a pun on consumerism and René Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am'.

Through the advent of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and SecondLife the boundaries between offline and online social relationships are now increasingly blurring². However, significant precursors of social networking, and SecondLife in particular, can be drawn from as early as the mid 80s with IRC (Internet Relay Chat), to more complex chat rooms incorporating narrative structures and game play with MUDs and MOOs (Multi-User Dungeons) in the late 80s, to some of the first online MUVes (Multi-User Virtual Environments) such as Habitat and ActiveWorlds. MUVes are now set to dominate the web in 2008 with Sony Playstation, Metaplace, Croquet and SecondLife all competing to develop WorldWideWeb-based interfaces. This industry focus, alongside convergent mobile Internet technologies, clearly indicates that MUVes will have an increased and sustained Internet presence in the future.

This project looks specifically at the concepts of presence and performance in SecondLife and first life and will attempt to bridge these two spaces through mixed reality techniques and interfaces. The project will further examine the notion of telepresence in SecondLife and first life spaces, the blurring between 'online' and 'offline' identities, and the signifiers and conditions that make us feel present in this world. This work will question how subjectivity is articulated in relation to embodiment and disembodiment. It will explore 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. The project aims to evaluate the diversity of personas and social life styles of the avatar.

² Mesch, G. S. and I. Talmud (2007). "Editorial Comment: e-Relationships - the blurring and reconfiguration of offline and online social boundaries." *Information Communication and Society* 10(5): 585-589, Routledge.

Biography

Professor of Creative Technology and leader of the Creative Technology Research Group in the Adelphi Research Institute for Creative Arts and Sciences, University of Salford. Born in 1966, he received a BA Hons. Fine Art at the Gwent College of Higher Education in 1988 and an MFA at the University of Reading in 1991. He was awarded the Golden Nica for Interactive Arts at the Prix Ars Electronica 1991 in Linz, and the Interactive Media Festival Sparkey Award in Los Angeles in 1994. Paul Sermon was artist-in-residence at the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe in 1993; dozent for telematic arts at the HGB Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, Germany from 1993 to 1999; and guest professor for performance and environment at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz from 1998 to 2000. Since June 2000 he has been based at the University of Salford, where he is researching immersive and expanded telematic environments.

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