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Urban intersections – Panel discussion and presentations of interactive urban installations in contested virtual spaces

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In the Gloaming, in the gloaming

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This research is attempting to establish and test the linking of simple phenomena and actions within virtual space causing reciprocated actions in actual space and visa versa. For example, kinetic breath or wind causing the grass to move, or a cloud to shift within our virtual real estate in Second Life. Crucially though it is concerned with the associative or resonant perception of these actions, enhancing and augmenting the sense of presence. Poetic and gestured resonances which could contribute to the experience of emotion, presence and community define the larger intention of this collaboration.

We have begun by establishing a protocol to allow transducers and sensors to send and receive information between the real and virtual environments. The first test of this has been the casting of a stone into a pool in second life causing an actual stone to be dropped into water via electromagnetic action in physical space and causing ripples to spread out from the event. This is currently in a crude and experimental form both graphically and sculpturally but has established a working pathway of communication. Further developments will use live video links to send real time images of the ripples as an analogue mirror of that action back into the pool in second life.

For the presentation at ISEA 09 in Belfast it is intended to test links in the opposite direction with real actions on the Belfast Waterfront causing equivalent actions and phenomena within Second Life, whilst exploiting Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould's transposition of people between these realities.

It will explore fire as the giver of warmth and as the focus for gathering. A giver of actual warmth on the Waterfront and associative presence within Second Life. It is hoped there can be a further blurring of these separations of virtual and actual and that it might be a focal point for people and avatars to gather and tell stories.

Thermal sensing will be used to link the establishment of the fire mirroring the actions of lighting and the establishment of the fire from the first flame to the glowing embers. The actual fire and its virtual equivalent will be modelled around an archetypal campfire. There will be a ring of stones defining and containing the fire and the sticks and wood will be arranged in a typical pyramid shape. This will be modelled in Second life and the lighting of the fire on the quayside will via the thermal sensing cause the virtual fire to establish itself in the gloaming.

Fire was used as part of "Pocahontas has misgivings about living in a Digital Matrix" presented at ISEA 98. Here objects and models controlled the navigation of a Pocahontas toy through a series of virtual journeys and the lighting of a real fire within the model fireplace created a mirror fire warming Pocahontas during her journey North.

Ludic Second Life Narrative

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Ludic Second Life Narrative is an on going project designed for the Big screen and was shown as part of the Moves 09 Festival. It is a playful environment, encouraging interaction both with the content and urban environment allowing users to explore alternative networked spaces and develop unique narrative events.

Ludic Second life Narrative questions the way that the public embody themselves in virtual worlds. Staged in an 'enchanted wood' as a virtual retreat within the actual urban environment, the aesthetic of the space and the avatars question the convention of realism in virtual environments. It offers an alternative to the stereotypes which prevail in Second Life. The avatars in this installation have a puppet like quality rather than the stereotypical Barbie and Ken analogy. So while the user's body controls the puppet in a natural and intuitive way the avatar does not attempt to resemble a first life human.

This work is designed for large format public video screens and explores their creative and cultural potential. It offers the opportunity to be involved in the development of innovative ways of engaging with the public in an urban environment using digital technology. Through the mixing of realities of the virtual and the real, users can explore alternative networked spaces and develop unique narrative events.

Ludic Second Life Narrative explores urban play and the way fun and enjoyment interact with and enhance new media technologies both in its design, creative development, everyday uses and discursive articulations. This is an area of research that has had little exploration, the interactions between technological developments and the pleasures described as 'fun', are few and far between [i].

Through my research I explore the creative and cultural potential that urban screens have to offer in the digital media age and how these emerging technologies and the digital infrastructure 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 information. Ludic Second Life Narrative explores issues of gender, boundaries and race, I am looking to explore whether there are possibilities for rediscovery of the urban space for critical discourse and political debate. The issue of public access to the creative use of the public space both digital and physical is political. Through the documentation of this work I use everyday practices to inform further research [ii].

I am interested in the potential for digital and pervasive media to offer creative opportunities for the public to actively engage and contribute to art for the many urban screens. As Matt Adams from Blast theory argues, the term the "user" is not apt because it has a suggestion of passivity and that instead we should talk about content created by the public. Affordability and accessibility of new technologies, open up the potential for content creation. Ludic Second Life Narrative allows the public to complete the work through the creation of their unique narrative. As Barthes suggests the public completes the work [iii].

[i] ISEA 2008 Ludic Interfaces

http://www.isea2008singapore.org/themes/ludic_interfaces.html

[ii] Michel de Certeau 'The Practice of Everyday Life'

[iii] Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author'

Peace Games

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Second Life 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 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 consumer aesthetics of Second Life 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 Second Life office begs the question: is Second Life 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' [i] apparentness of its community? Moreover, does Second Life influence first lives? And therefore could our first life existence start to reflect our Second Life conscience as this community continues to grow and develop into the future? 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.

Through the advent of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Second Life the boundaries between offline and online social relationships are now increasingly blurring [ii]. However, significant precursors of social networking, and Second Life 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 2009 with Sony Playstation, Metaplace, Croquet and Second Life 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 Second Life 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 Second Life 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.

[i] 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'.

[ii] 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, London.



Peace Games by Paul Sermon, 2008



Ludic Second Life Narrative by Charlotte Gould, 2009