

Archipelagos of Art

In the first year of the twenty first century I was sitting in a virtual three dimensional environment courtesy of Active Worlds [1.]. In this online computer generated virtual world of cubes and spheres my presence was identifiable as an avatar - literally and figuratively an avatar is an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu when he is on a mission to earth. My conversations were the commonplace "Hello" - "How are you ?" And I make no friends but the next day I invite my friend H who lives in Paris to come and join me and we sit and talk among the spheres and cubes about philosophy. The experience was exhilarating and I propose to my then head of Department that I hold a virtual seminar with my photography students in this virtual world , he confers with his superiors and their reply is "We have other plans for online education." For a college which at that time didn't even have a web site I realised this was going to be a long haul.

Today we know 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?"

While innovative, the web of information connected by the internet is in many ways reassuringly familiar, relying as it does on older traditions of reading text documents or watching moving pictures. Database retrieval and wireless communication have revolutionised search and made anywhere access available, but in many ways the web is largely a re purposing of old information in a new format for a new medium.

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.

Examples of self authored virtual environments are the many 'worlds' of Open Simulator[2.] and it's precursor Second Life where individuals effectively rent space on a server, as they would to host a web site. However instead of a web of linked documents and pictures, Open Simulator supports three dimensional virtual environments. The software of Open Simulator provides the programme for an infrastructure which visually has the topography and geography of an archipelago of islands surround by sea which are accessed by a viewer similar to the browsers we use to access web pages.

The example of Second Life (Linden Lab 2005)[3.] provides a good introduction to the possibilities of self authored virtual worlds. Everything in the world of Second Life has been created by it's residents and the creative input has been enormous, it is as if a virtual reconstruction the size of Los Angeles has been built with free labour. There are now many similar examples in the rapidly growing worlds of Open Simulator 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 technicalities of up-scaling over the coming decade need not concern us, my interests are instead with questions about the extent to which virtual environments offer a paradigm shift in how we might live, work and socially interact with each other in a post industrial society. Our initial question should be; that if the world wide web is currently a re purposing of older media what are the precedents for virtual environments?

From a technical perspective virtual environments developed from text based internet chat rooms or Multi User Domains , through Massive Multi-user Online Games for the X-Box and Playstation, and subsequently the Massive Multi-user Online Role Play Games such as World of Warcraft and Lord of the Rings Online. While all of these have been contributory, the game element in these examples is paramount, the future self authored virtual environments while retaining an element of play are not games but instead emphasise the creative, analytical, instructional and practical.

In the coming decade real world retailers will use these virtual environments as an additional window for sales and marketing. As a model we can point to the social habit of shopping in Second Life where the enthusiasm of residents for buying virtual goods made by other residents - such as frocks, shoes, houses and furniture account for in-world sales transactions of around one million US dollars per month. The conversion to selling real goods only requires the first retailer to make the imaginative leap. Architects and town planners, already accustomed to using Computer Aided Design increasingly employ virtual environments to better vision the eventual construction and for testing evacuation and safety protocols. It is one thing to go through a paper check list of actions in the event of a catastrophe, quite another when the catastrophe is all around you and no one is answering the phone, simulation as NASA has demonstrated is a very powerful tool.

Manufacturers will also use virtual environments to mesh with the evolving 3D printing industry which promises to revolutionise manufacturing. The Education industry, increasingly unaffordable for the many will see it's expensive bricks and mortar replaced by virtual classrooms. But in most of these examples we are simply doing an old thing in a new way, for example it is not hard to see how a call centre for a European bank which is currently located in Mumbai, India could be transposed to operate in a virtual environment.

So much for the developing technology, but what are the aesthetic precursors of these environments ? 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 [4.], but apocryphally for the game players at least a common answer 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?” [5.]

Fundamental to this enterprise is that the avatar is an abstraction of its owner and can appear in-world however you wish, you literally choose the skin you wear and while most people choose to look like a human being some prefer to be extraterrestrials. 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 bodiedness and their age. There may be evolutionary reasons for this behaviour and while political correctness has had a great influence, the reality is that prejudice is deeply ingrained and the basis for much of our tribal identity. 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.

It is surprising how many groups engaged in role play use a real world novel as their starting point. The ancient kingdom of 'Gor' in Second Life was inspired by John Norman's novel 'Tarnsman of Gor' (1967), where the simplicity of character definition - the patriarch rules and the position of Gorean women are clearly defined, makes Gor an early if surprising choice for many male and female avatars engaged in improvisational acting. Similarly Paula Reage's “The Story of O” (1952) and Anna Rice's catholic story of submission "Reclaiming Beauty"(1983) have both become themes for role play in environments where a hierarchy of masters, mistresses, princes and princesses accept willing tributes for initiation into allotted roles. The leader of the pack however has to be Bram Stoker's 'Dracula' (1897), reworked as the comic book "Bloodlines" (1993) which has resulted in the virtual blood bank of 'Bloodlines' [6.] which services hungry vampire clans across many 3D worlds.

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.”[7.] 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. Tsu-chung Su remarks “There is always an ecstatic and mystic aura built around our confrontation with the mask, in which the affect of the Dionysian takes its effect.” [8.]

There are other aspects of virtual worlds which offer new opportunities for visual artists particularly photography, animation, machinima and virtual sculpture. From the pre modern era millions of illustrations of artworks, particularly paintings, courtesy of Google images have been imported into virtual worlds and re purposed as wall decorations for domestic interiors. From the modern era photography has been reborn in virtual environments where screen shots made with a graphics card have replaced the machine camera. When at the end of the twentieth century digital cameras finally removed the last vestiges of craft from classical photography such that to paraphrase Maholy Nagy photography is now practised by literate and illiterate alike, it is ironic that the growth of virtual 'Photo Studios' in Second Life is reminiscent of the explosive growth of their real life counterparts in the nineteenth century. The virtual camera also 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, already popular on YouTube these 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 it's description would be virtual sculpture, abstract compositions of prims, textures, particles, transparency, phantoms and physics where space itself is a plastic dimension. In these digital installations immersion can also mean submersion as in the work of the Canadian artist Bryn Oh whose “No Love” (2010) [9] commission for the Spanish pavilion at the Shanghai Expo (2010) presented a world underwater installed on the Second Life grid.

The scale of rendered artworks is equally plastic, for example all constraints on size have been ignored in the Open Simulator virtual sculpture by Mosmax Hax aka Max Moswitzer at The Chris Marker Museum on the New Genres grid [10.] Here museum architecture freed from earthly constraint floats free, buildings intersect in a Brobdingnag metropolis of colourful juxtapositions and feral cats. This virtual museum does not however yield it's secrets easily and hidden among the outrageous are small scenes of intimacy, biographical recollection and memory in what is a new take on retrospectives.

Perversely for a 3D environment flatness is the theme for the rendered art of Ruben Haan at Kliederaar on the OS Grid [11.] here the viewer disorientated by a landscape without horizon is forced to grasp at the minimal visual anchors provided by randomly distributed coloured forms. Open Simulator is an archipelago of artists studios and while born of the mathematics of computer algorithms there are few precursors for these rendered digital artworks. 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. The installation on the LPDT2 island sim [12.] on the New Genres Grid, is a reworking of Roy Ascott's ground breaking “La Plissure du Texte”(1983) [13]. This re-working of Ascott's original concept by Elif Ayter, Max Moswitzer and Selavy Oh. is a visually stunning metaphor for modern administration. Located on an island of mesh terraces where a flood of letters rain down onto ranks of prim desks in a bureaucratic

nightmare of Babel while below, surrounded by mountains of textured waste a central administration fights the urgency of red letters as it bends under the phantom volumes of flexible legislative policy. Social, dramatic, aesthetic and conceptual the virtual worlds are ground breaking, the avant garde is alive and well and living on the archipelagos.

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