

Musing the Metaverse

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This paper will look at the ways in which museums and cultural institutions have moved into Second Life. It explores how the new, and surprisingly not so new social and cultural experiences are evolving in the immersive, 3D world, and describe the implications of walking or flying around the impressively modelled buildings and environments located in the Linden Lab's grid of thousands of islands. Through a series of case studies of museum builds, and islands of cultural interest, such issues as; community building, immersive experience, and social interaction are explored in a world that simply doesn't go away when you log out. This paper considers what it means for a cultural institution to realise their activities, services, exhibitions and institutional vision as they take on a [second] life of their own.

Key words: 3D worlds, immersive, Second Life, museums, art, avatars, culture

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid 1990's, when museums first moved into their electronic showcases on the Internet, museum professionals have been developing innovative ways to present and represent their collections to their public. In the early days, all a museum had to do was to create some sort of electronic brochure to stake their claim. Over the first decade, they went on to enhance their educational mandate by uploading their collections and exhibitions online; building on library and archive informatics architectures as museum informatics quickly evolved into a distinct field in its own right. Since then the web has moved on and museums are currently concerned with the aggregation of their objects and developing intuitive platforms to make collections accessible to remote visitors around the world.

Some even say that we are actually moving towards Web 3.0; bringing with it even more challenges for the museum community. This is currently described as a truly semantic web; one that grants deep access to information to the web, but, at the same times it is also becoming a space that is tempting our public into new kinds of synthetic worlds. This paper reflects on these persistent as worlds, where people are invited – or at least their avatars – to move into and around buildings and across landscapes; all meticulously modelled in 3D. These sites do not follow the web page metaphor, rather are ordered as connected islands, where everyone can build their own home, sell their own wares in their very own shop, even construct an entire library or museum for other avatars; all built with the tools provided for free in the in-world environment.

This paper will discuss these persistent worlds and their potential for the museum community, taking into consideration how they are fast becoming highly social spaces, whose 3D characteristics lends themselves far more readily to the museum experience than did the web-page metaphor of the World Wide Web. These are beautifully crafted virtual environments; spaces where people 'meet' as movement avatars, and interact in Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVE's) exploring isometric, simulated galleries, wander around 3D museums, and visit persuasive historical reconstructions.

In the summer of 2007, the *New Scientist* ran a three-part special report on *Second Life*, and around the same time, the virtual world hit the front page of *Newsweek*. These are the worlds that emerged from Neal Stephenson's fictional vision of the *Metaverse* in his novel *Snow Crash* which have long since crossed over from being a fringe fantasy for pure escapists, a persistent world – a world that never goes away; even when you log out of the community, and continues to thrive even in your absence. Our discussion turns, of course, to how museums are already staking their claim in the new frontier, and in order to describe the different possibilities, this paper will showcase a number of cultural institutions that are already well developed and are even thriving in-world.

Musée du Louvre on Thompson Island

Many of the in-world cultural institutions are not listed; one simply hears about them from others or flies into them by chance. News travels fast in *Second Life*, and like-minded people know how to use both in-world and online networks to spread the word. Currently, one of the more popular museums is the Second Louvre Museum, where self-proclaimed curator, Kharis Forte, has developed an impressive rendering of the physical museum, now transposed to Thompson Island. Forte's 'physical' layout follows the same

floor plan as the real museum, but he names his galleries, and curates their contents at whim. For some this might be a perplexing visit. Professionals, however, who work in the real Louvre, might find it downright shocking. For while Forte has modelled his SL museum on the original architecture in exquisite 3D detail; the collections displayed inside bear no resemblance to those that appear in the physical museum located far away in Paris. Forte does, of course, offer us his disclaimer, 'carved' in brown 'marble'. 'This museum' Fortis claims, 'is in no way affiliated with the Musée du Louvre in Paris, France. No claims or representation of being anything other than a museum of Second Life are being made. Please refer inquiries to Kharis Fortis.'

While this rendering of the Parisian Louvre seems extraordinary, considering that the staff of the real museum had no part in the support or development of this museum, never the less, The Second Louvre still continues to be one of the best known museums in Second Life.

It seems that Second Life, as a potential sandbox for museum entrepreneurs, but is still going through the very same teething troubles as did the Internet over a decade ago. In 1995, Nicolas Pioch, an enterprising student from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Télécommunications, Paris was awarded the second prize of the BMW Foundation contest Initiatives 1995 for his *WebMuseum* project to for Best Use of Multiple Media¹. On his own initiative, Pioch had created an impressive website that included hundreds of images and copious texts creating a convincing representation of the institution, that he had put together himself, unwittingly (or not) by-passing the authorities in his bid to represent the famous Louvre Museum online.

According to Pioch's own disclaimer 'The WebMuseum was **not** made as part of any official or supported project. There's not grant behind that, it is total pleasureware (tm). I decided to start working on this exhibit because I felt more artistic stuff was needed on the Internet, so the WebMuseum took over my free time (nights and week-ends...) since mid-march 1994'. Within a very short time, he was contacted by the authorities, and, after prolonged legal proceedings, was required to change the original Louvre Online to the less institutional reference to his web pages as the *WebMuseum*.

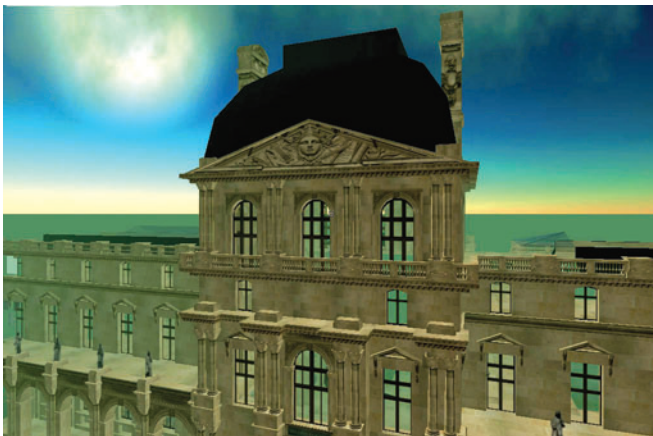


Figure 1: Second Louvre, Second Life

Clearly we are witnessing a similar misinterpretation of the institutional Louvre here in Second Life, and we can but wonder how long it will take the authorities to catch up with Pioch's doppelganger, Kharis Forte. Meantime, enjoy the exquisitely rendered architectural details, and appreciate the meticulously crafted 3D modeling, while you still can, as you fly up to, inside of, and around the Second Louvre.

The Staatliche Kunstsammlungen's Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden

The following example of a Second Life Museum is the spectacular Dresden Gallery² in Second Life. This museum is located on its own island, and is an impressive replica of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen's Old Masters Picture Gallery in Dresden. This sim (simulation) has been fully authorized by the mother institution who remind us how 'the locations of many famous masterpieces, such as Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" or Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus" have been transposed to this beautifully modeled museum, and have been reconstructed, true to scale to includes *all* of the 750 masterpieces in the permanent exhibition'. Andrew Curry from Wired Magazine³ playfully suggests, 'if you can't make it to Dresden this summer, consider teleporting'. While this might sound rather alarming to some museum professionals, who tend to prefer their visitors to walk through their physical door, this simulation is exquisite. Acting in the same ways an institutional web portal, the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen's Second Life presence may well generate enough interest so that after visitors have discovered the richness of the collections in the simulated build, they will actually seek out the physical museum to see the real exhibitions for themselves.



Figure 2: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden

Seminars, workshops and conferences

In addition to the miniature renderings of real museums in Second Life, there are many other opportunities for museum professionals to extend their activities into persistent worlds. Almost all of the real life (RL) functions of a museum may be readily transposed into the isometric world, including; gallery talks, guided tours, a concert recital attended, and performed by avatars in real time; even an additional shop front to sell museum merchandise; served by a backend of the museums 'real' online shop. What a better way to promote a new exhibition; allowing visitors a preview to the real thing, or an annotated reminder of a really special show to share with friends after the visit. This is still very

early days for museums to extend their web activities into the worlds such as Linden Labs have conjured up, with many more similar worlds already setting down the blueprints for yet more islands, and even more commercial and creative growth for the thousands of avatars who are already active in virtual worlds, as well as for the thousands of people who haven't yet signed up.

Over recent months I have attended several professional conferences held in-world. These have presented all kinds of new possibilities; things that were not previously quite so compelling before the Second Life platform had become robust enough for real time voice conversations, and for very persuasive exchanges. Two of the conferences brought Second Life to audiences who had not yet really had an opportunity to explore what it meant to go to an island, even though they had heard about things going on there through the media, and from friends and colleagues. Other occasions were more pragmatic — acting as meetings that in essence allowed me to 'travel' to conferences without actually having to get onto a plane. All of the events brought together the professional museum community to a shared place and time, and allowed for meaningful exchange of ideas and experiences in, and about their own practice in Second Life. Each event, in their own way, shifted the benchmark a little; all, in some way effecting how people think about sharing ideas, even though not all of us were actually present in the same room at the time. At the EVA/MINERVA 2007 Conference⁴ held in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University in November 2007 the meeting was held simultaneously in Second Life and in the air-conditioned auditorium in Jerusalem. This year the annual conference hosted close to three hundred people who had come to hear how advanced technologies are being developed and applied in the cultural area, with an impressive range of European Commission supported projects presented during the two-day meeting. The hour and a half long session that took place in Second Life brought the physical audience together with the in-world panel of presenters, and offered an exciting glimpse about what was currently possible in-world.

During the session, participants were taken by Marie Rytk_I_ (RL) / Kaja Lurra (SL) to her build; *Stockholm's Old City, Gamla Stan*. Marie/Kaja is a SL terra-firma who specialises in sims that create specific cultural ambiance. From the auditorium at the Jerusalem located conference, Kaja took us to the pre-launch of Stockholm's Old City, Gamla Stan, that attracts Swedes to listen to music, dance together, wander around the gorgeous sim, get a



Figure 3: Stockholm's Old City, Gamla Stan

massage, order pizza or beer or simply hang out together by the port and the magnificent ships moored there.

Similar contemporary, or historical reconstructions are popular in Second Life, and amongst the numerous period sims, avatars can teleport directly into Paris, 1900 where they can visit the Moulin Rouge for a performance, or sit down with a 'drink' with friends.



Figure 4: The Moulin Rouge on Paris, 1900

Outside of the famous nightclub, visitors can also take a gentle stroll along the boulevards with other international 'Parisians', and, in spite of the fly free zone determined by the local scripting, visitors can climb the 3 stages of the Eifel Tower and jump of the top. Avatars are promised a safe landing, as instead of the usual avatar falling down animation, where the miniature figure kind of crumples up and goes on to dust his or herself off, this fall is softened by a parachute which luckily opens automatically as the earth starts to come unpleasantly too close.

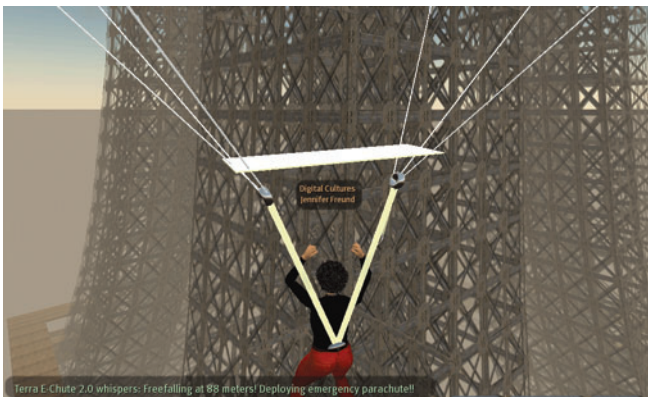


Figure 5: Parachuting from the Eifel Tower, 1900

An even more ambitious event took everyone, speakers and participants alike to the *New Media Consortium Conference Center (NMC)*⁵, on March 8, 2008. This pioneering conference was organised by The Virtual Worlds: Libraries, Education and Museums Conference, and

was held exclusively in Second Life. The day long conference, thoughtfully encompassing as many time zones as humanly possible, took place in several locations on the conference center. As most sims have severe traffic limitation, the cut off for this conference seem to have been around 80 attendees, and there were clearly many more people interested in attending the conference that was possible, in spite of the \$8000 Lindens (approximately US \$30) registration fee.



Figure 6: Keynote address at NMC conference

The demand was so great on the day that, in fact, some people coordinated their leaving the sim with others so that their friends could get access. Barbara Galik (RL) /Puglet Dancer (SL) and Kitty Pope (RL) / Kitty Phillip (SL) presented the keynote discussion: “Virtual Worlds: Libraries, Education, Museums, and More” in the main auditorium, and the breakout parallel sessions took place at number of locations around the build. The auditorium was packed with avatars, all watching the slides roll on the screen on the stage, and attentively listening to the presenters over voice. The audience was a mixed pack – with not all attendees recognisably human, but just as interested in the proceedings as their human-shaped participants seemed to be. I have to admit that I was engrossed in conversation with another participant during the keynote; but luckily, and unlike in a traditional conference hall, nobody overheard our animated typing, or noticed the intense chatting taking place from keyboard to keyboard.



Figure 7: NMC Conference Center

My own presentation, *Persistent Worlds: Will They Ever Go Away?* took place in voice at the Muriel Cooper Coliseum, and argued that these kinds of worlds are far from being a fringe fantasy land for pure escapists, and have long since developed into a persistent world for play, commerce, creativity and exploration. My own focus, as always, was on cultural institutions, museums and historical simulations. I was thrilled at the lively conversation that took place as my slides came into focus (I have since learned to pre-load them as one would when caching a website you are about to present) and the audience contributed almost as much as I did. At some point, during my hour-long presentation, however, I did suffer a break in presence (BIP's) — a term which Mel Slater used in reference to his virtual reality studies as 'a moment when the illusion provided by the virtual reality breaks down, and you find yourself where you really are — in the case of virtual reality⁶). The projection of me, Jennifer Freund, the avatar who was speaking into the miniature coliseum on my behalf was, at one point momentarily jerked into the reality of my own living room, when, the (very real) family popped in for visit — it was a Saturday afternoon after all. In spite of this very tempting distraction, I was able to refocus — much like one would when called away from a phone call — and continue my presentation to the collegial avatars attentively sitting in the Coliseum, waiting for my next slide — I don't think they actually noticed the kids trouping in for tea ... All the presentations are online on the NMC website.



Figure 8: NMC Conference Center

On May 18, 2008 ICOM museums celebrated annual International Museum Day, and this year the theme was *Museums: agents of social change and development*. In addition to the traditional seminars, lectures and exhibition visits that took place in museums around the world on, for the first year, ICOM added a Second Life location for museum professionals to join in the festivities from the comfort of their office chair, or, as it was a Sunday, if they so chose, from the luxury of their armchair at home.

Avatars were welcomed with the indispensable coffee, and quickly got themselves comfortable in small groups on the cozy sofas for informal chitchat for the 24 hours that crossed all possible time zones. Participants to this event were encouraged to visit the rock art grotto, created by Bjorlyn Loon, a SL designer who built the rock face, and embellished it with pseudo-ancient cave paintings. This made an excellent locus for exploration, and an obvious focus of *avatorial* discussion. Tours of the Tech Museum campus were available by a specially-scripted, flying, ICOM-bus which took those

participants – who were perhaps a little weary of flying themselves around the build as their still unfamiliar avatar – but who still wanted to enjoy a bird’s eye view of the Tech Museum’s campus.



Figure 9: ICOM International Museum Day, 2008

ICOM-branded T-shirts were distributed to participants, and ICOM staff welcomed museum professionals during the event, where each participating museum was represented by a “curator” avatar. The celebration began at 3 am, Eastern Daylight Time (9 am SLT) and continued on for this especially long day with the highlight of International Museum Day taking place at 6 p.m., Paris Time, (9am SLT) when Alissandra Cummins, ICOM’s President gave a welcome speech from the Second Life podium to the assembled avatars from all over the world.

The Tech Island in Second Life, The Tech Virtual, who hosted International Museum Day, was developed by the Tech’s San José, California (USA) with the simulated facility looks very much like the real site. While the auditorium and exhibition galleries are modeled on the real museum, the build is designed to facilitate projects and community connections using virtual worlds as a platform to build new kinds of collaborations within the museum world. I had to admit that sitting down with Mars Voyager, an ‘astronaut’ from the Second Life Planetarium in a fascinating discussion about what added value their visitors could get



Figure 10: ICOM International Museum Day, 2008

from flying around their island, made for a useful exchange ideas. Where else could I learn, first hand about what the virtual world could offer museums, that simply wasn't possible in real life, and perhaps, even more interestingly, what this could contribute to meaningful visitor experience?

CONCLUSION

This paper has mapped a selection of the museum builds and professional community activities that are currently evolving in Second Life. While clearly the Linden Lab version of a simulated world is one that is very often in the news, there are several MUVE's currently under construction. Of considerable interest for the museum community are those that are being developed as open sims (under open source frameworks⁷). These could be the worlds that operate beyond the Linden's grid, and may well offer the solution that museums would prefer. At the moment there is a strict prohibition of anyone younger than eighteen years old being able to register and enter the simulated world, but museums are directed and committed by the ICOM definition to grant access to everyone. If the museum community is able to act in an orchestrated way, then I would call to search for the kinds of solutions for the professional community that are open for the whole family in museum tradition; sites that grant access to avatars, both above and below the age of eighteen.

Having said that, taking the quality of social interaction that takes place in MUVE's, I do feel that it makes a lot of sense for museums to consider the 3D space for their potential for bringing people together under the museum umbrella, and, in just the same way that museum websites stimulate interest about museum activities. Once the buzz extends beyond the museum walls, new kinds of visitors could be interested enough to come through the physical door of the museum, and not only will they be already well informed, they also may be curious enough to see for themselves what all this excitement is about.

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