An interactive public art video installation incorporating Second Life environments and user interaction.

By Paul Sermon

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Conceptual Statement

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'[i] 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.

Through the advent of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and SecondLife the boundaries between offline and online social relationships are now increasingly blurring[ii]. 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.

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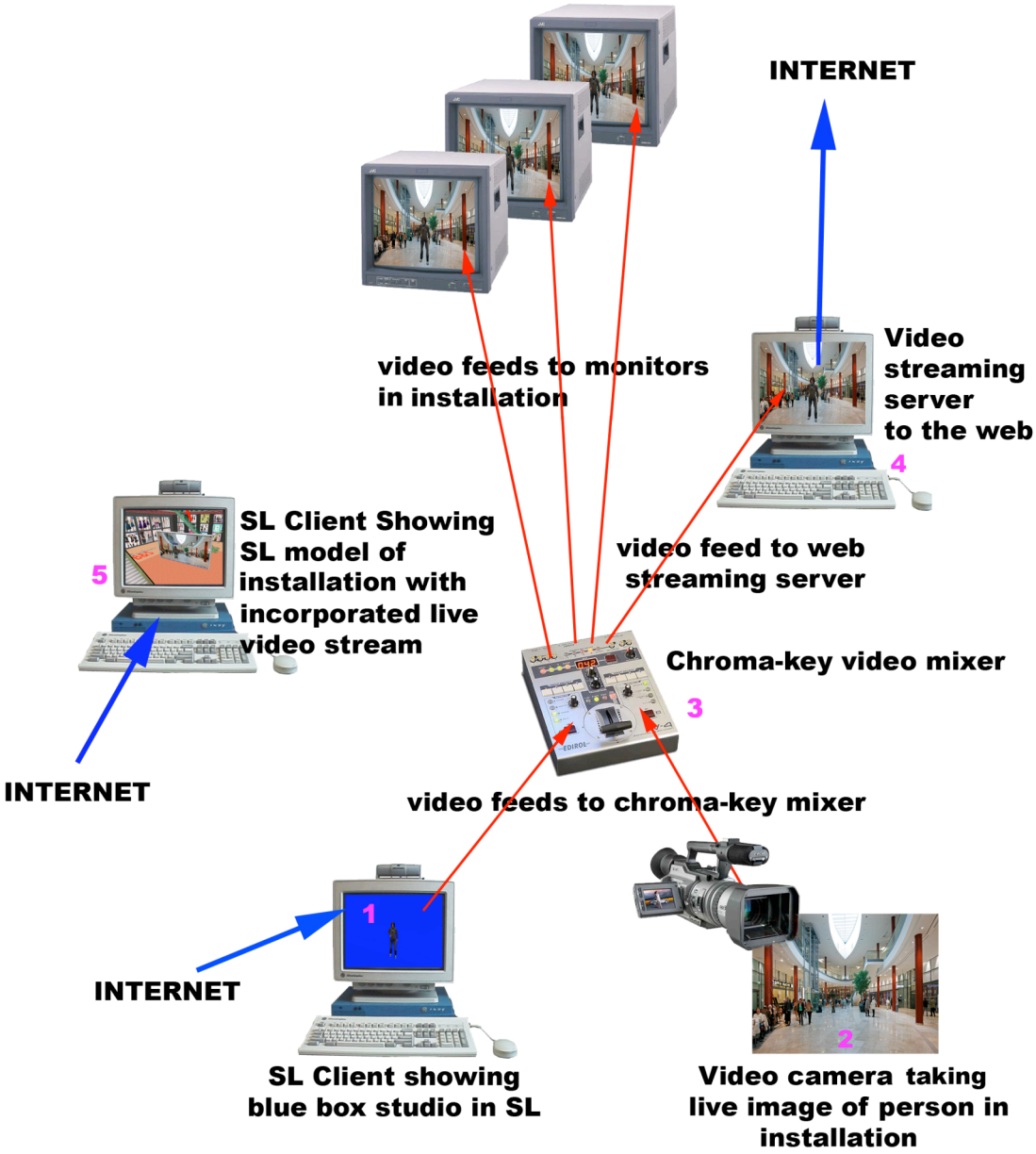
[i] *The term **I shop therefore I am** was used by artist Barbara Kruger in 1998 as a pun on consumerism and René Descartes' statement 'I think therefore I am'.*

[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.*

Video Flow Diagram



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Biography

Born in Oxford, England, 1966. Studied BA Hon's Fine Art degree under Professor Roy Ascott at The University of Wales, from September 1985 to June 1988. Studied a Post-graduate MFA degree at The University of Reading, England, from October 1989 to June 1991. Awarded the Prix Ars Electronica “Golden Nica”, in the category of interactive art, for the hyper media installation “Think about the People now”, in Linz, Austria, September 1991. Produced the ISDN videoconference installation “Telematic Vision” as an Artist in Residence at the Center for Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, from February to November 1993. Received the “Sparkey Award” from the Interactive Media Festival in Los Angeles, for the telepresent video installation “Telematic Dreaming”, June 1994. From 1993 to 1999 employed as Dozent for Media Art at the HGB Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, Germany. During this time continued to produced further interactive telematic installations including “Telamatic Encounter” in 1996 and “The Tables Turned” in 1997 for the Ars Electronica Centre in Linz, and the ZKM Media Museum in Karlsruhe. From 1997 to 2001 employed as Guest Professor for Performance and Environment at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz, Austria. Since June 2000 based at The University of Salford working primarily within the research field of immersive and expanded telematic environments.