

## MIXED REALITIES (2011)

Interview by Jo-Anne Green and Helen Thorington

For “*Unsitely Aesthetics*,” Maria Miranda (ed), forthcoming

In a 2006 proposal to the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New Radio and Performing Arts, Inc. (NRPA) co-directors – Jo-Anne Green and Helen Thorington – requested support for *Mixed Realities*<sup>1</sup> an international competition, exhibition, and symposium. For the first time, practitioners were invited to engage a simultaneous tripling of space in which two sites – a real world gallery (Huret & Spector Gallery, Boston) and a virtual world gallery (Ars Virtua, Second Life<sup>2</sup>) – were networked via a third site, the Internet gallery Turbulence.org. Thus, *Mixed Realities* explored the convergence – through cyberspace – of real and synthetic places made possible by computers and networks. It enabled people distributed across multiple physical and virtual spaces to communicate with one another and share experiences in real-time.

NRPA issued an international call for proposals in early 2007. Out of one hundred and forty proposals, five were commissioned: *Imaging Beijing*<sup>3</sup> by John Craig Freeman; *Remote*<sup>4</sup> by Neill Donaldson, Usman Haque, Ai Hasegawa, and Georg Tremmel; *No Matter*<sup>5</sup> by Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott; *The Vitruvian World*<sup>6</sup> by Michael Takeo Magruder, Drew Baker and David Steele; and *Caterwaul*<sup>7</sup> by Pierre Proske, with technical assistance from Artem Baguinski and Brigit Lichtenegger.

Curated by Jo-Anne Green, the exhibition opened in February 2008.

For this chapter, Turbulence.org (Green and Thorington) interviewed Freeman, Kildall/Scott, and Magruder.

Turbulence: **Briefly describe your work.**

**John Craig Freeman (JCF):** *Imaging Beijing* was part of the larger project, *Imaging Place*, a place-based, virtual reality project that combined panoramic photography, digital video, and virtual worlds to investigate and document situations where the forces of globalization are impacting the lives of individuals in local communities. When a denizen of *Second Life* first arrived at *Imaging Beijing*, she walked over a satellite image of central Beijing that was populated by a network of nodes – constructed of primitive spherical geometry with panoramic photographs texture mapped to the interior. The

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<sup>1</sup> [http://turbulence.org/mixed\\_realities/](http://turbulence.org/mixed_realities/)

<sup>2</sup> Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>) is a shared, synthetic, 3-D environment in which people can interact in real-time by means of a virtual self or avatar. In 2006, Second Life, was attracting millions of new online users who were buying and selling land, spending real world money, hanging out with their friends, visiting galleries, and attending classes, conferences and concerts.

<sup>3</sup> <http://turbulence.org/works/ImagingBeijing>

<sup>4</sup> <http://turbulence.org/works/remote/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://turbulence.org/works/nomatter>

<sup>6</sup> <http://turbulence.org/works/vitruvianworld>

<sup>7</sup> <http://turbulence.org/works/caterwaul>

avatar could step into the center of each node, giving her the sensation of being immersed in the location. In the physical gallery, a web-cam captured live video of the user's head that was then transposed onto the head of the exhibition avatar in real-time. That is, the real-life user assumed the identity of the *Second Life* avatar as she navigated the installation. Time-stamped links in the virtual space launched a browser, which opened a web journal of the *Imaging Beijing* field research.

**Scott Kildall/Victoria Scott (SK/VS):** *No Matter* was an installation of “imaginary objects” – things that appear in myth, literature, and thought experiments, such as the Holy Grail, the Trojan Horse, the Time Machine and the Yellow Submarine – but had never been physically built. We commissioned builders in *Second Life*, a space of pure imagination, to create 40 imaginary objects. We then extracted the 3D data through a digital backdoor and reconstructed it as paper sculptures on archival paper to resemble the crude 3D graphics of *Second Life*. On the website, we tracked how much each builder was paid (based on an hourly wage) to reflect the labor value behind each cultural treasure.

**Michael Takeo Magruder (MTM):** In the 1st century BC, Roman writer, architect and engineer Vitruvius codified specific building formulae based on the guiding principles of strength, utility and beauty. He believed that architecture was intrinsically linked to nature and was a human imitation of cosmic order. The most well known interpretation of this postulate is the *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci in which the male form is depicted in unity with the square and circle – representing material and spiritual existence respectively. This tripartite union of human body, material form and spiritual essence maintains relevance within the current climate of distributed presences, mixed realities and Internet cultures, and the proliferation of synthetic worlds and virtual constructs engendered by our ubiquitous technology provides new realms for both actual existence and creative exploration. *The Vitruvian World* was a multi-nodal and recursive artwork that embodied the principles of Vitruvius within this context. Existing in three distinct yet interconnected spaces, the work simultaneously embraced the virtual, the physical, and the network connecting them.

**Turbulence:** In laying the groundwork for her book, Maria Miranda refers to the Internet as both a public and “unsitely” space. Unsitely artworks are simultaneously on- and off-line or, as David Crawford wrote, they are both non-located in the “space of flows” (Castells) and located in the space of places (museums or galleries). *Mixed Realities* asked that the work be positioned in both and, additionally, required one component of the work to be located in *Second Life*. How did you approach the challenge of networking three distinct “sites” for your piece?

**JCF:** The physical component of *Imaging Beijing* consisted of an immersive, interactive installation in a darkened alcove of the Huret & Spector Gallery. A nine by twelve foot projection and a simple controller knob allowed visitors to the physical gallery to control a dedicated avatar, navigate the *Imaging Beijing* virtual installation in *Second Life*, and interact with other people through their avatars. Blog entries were accessible via the

World Wide Web and through place markers in the virtual installation. All three parts were designed to be interdependent.

The virtual component consisted of a large platform floating high above the virtual exhibition space, *Ars Virtua*, in *Second Life*. A satellite image of the city of Beijing created a map for the avatar to walk across while navigating a network of spherical nodes with panoramic imagery texture mapped to the interiors. The avatar could walk to the center of each of these nodes and view the image in any direction, giving her the sensation of being immersed in the actual location. At each node an audio clip would play, providing narrative content for the scene.

Although the work addressed the social, historical and political situation unfolding at the site, the narrative content largely consisted of the recollection of formative memory by the residents of Beijing. The result was a kind of multidimensional, inhabitable memory map.

The content of the project was created on location in Beijing during the summer of 2007, when the city was preparing to host the 2008 Olympics. Large swaths of the city's traditional *hutong* neighborhoods were being demolished at the time to make room for Olympic building and to craft an image of the "new" China. These neighborhoods had rich histories, some as old as five hundred years. The word *hutong* is derived from the Mongolian word *hottog*, which means water well, since these neighborhoods grew up around the local common well. The word has come to simply refer to a complex of distinctive enclosed courtyard style dwellings accessible only by labyrinths of narrow, walled alleyways, some just wide enough for pedestrians and rickshaws.

In *Imaging Beijing*, the story unfolds spatially rather than linearly as the avatar explores the space, moving from a vibrant living *hutong*, through the demolition zone, to a construction site and out into the bustling, skyscraper lined streets of twenty-first century Beijing.

A web-cam captured live video of the gallery visitor's face in real time and transmitted it to a mask-like screen worn on the head of an avatar in-world. If other avatars were present, they could talk in real-time using voice chat.

The installation was designed to destabilize audiences' sense of location and place.

**SK/VS:** We thought of *Second Life* as a medium through which imaginary objects could pass into physical existence. *Second Life* served as a production environment – where we commissioned builders to make the 40 objects as 3D models that reflected the imaginary nature of the space. Realizing that the average gallery viewer would have little knowledge of *Second Life*, we sought to suggest an alternate reality (rather than a literal depiction of it) by creating real life physical sculptures. We thus favored physical art objects that embodied qualities of *Second Life*.

The website had a different function altogether: it was a reference for those who could not be there to see the work in person, and it showed the production process through text and graphics. It told the back-story of *No Matter*, how we first hired builders to create the imaginary objects, then tracked their labor-time and finally constructed the objects in physical space.

**Michael Takeo Magruder (MTM):** Our creative team consisted of myself (a contemporary visual artist working extensively within physical gallery contexts), Drew Baker (a senior academic research fellow renowned for his construction of online virtual environments) and David Steele (a leading information architect specialized in the development and programming of networked systems). As each person in the collective was naturally aligned to a particular “site” – and given the group’s previous history of interdisciplinary collaborations and the extensive pool of expertise and resources upon which we could draw – it was a logical and quite natural process of conceptualizing, developing and realizing an installation across the three proposed spaces (i.e. realities).

**Turbulence: As Miwon Kwon wrote in her book *One Place After Another*, site-specific art was initially inseparable from its environmental context (Land Art). “Site” later evolved to include the mind (Conceptual Art) and the body (Performance Art). Thus, in certain instances, the site of the work shifted from a specific geographic location to the location of the body in space; and in others, the site found its “locational” anchor in the discursive realm.” Which definition of site-specificity best describes your piece?**

**JCF:** *Imaging Beijing* is part of a much larger art project and research investigation titled *Imaging Place*. The goal is to invent a new sustainable, modular art practice, which can expand over time; adapt as technologies evolve; and migrate when they become obsolete.

This work has been ongoing since 1997 and includes hundreds of individual locations and hours of content from Beijing, New York, Taipei, São Paulo, British Columbia, New England, Warsaw, the U.S./Mexico Border, the Miami River, Kaliningrad, Niagara, Appalachia and more.

Rather than the synthetic, imaginary experience of what we have come to regard as virtual reality, *Imaging Place* is based in real places around the world. I travel to locations where the forces of globalization are impacting the lives of individuals in local communities and document the place, its people and my experience using panoramic photography and video, 3D gaming and interactive technologies.

Much of this work focuses on borders, ports and other conflict zones, places where culture and nation states collide, places that are undergoing profound transformation and differences are brought into full relief. It has always been my intention to locate the edges and call into question the meaning of boundaries, walls, fences – both physical and virtual, literal and figurative. In other words, it is the exploration of the borders between mind, body and space that motivate me as an artist. *Imaging Beijing* was an exploration of the boundaries between the virtual world, the gallery, the city of Beijing, the self, the

avatar, subject, object, etc. It tried to locate where one becomes the other and brings the shift that Kwon writes about into the awareness of the audience.

**SK/VS:** These initial contexts of site-specificity rely on movements away from the physical museum in the late 60s/early 70s, while the contemporary context is somewhat different. Like the site-specific artwork of that era, *No Matter* reflected its own time: the widespread shift to digital production, the potential for endless reproduction, and an engagement with various simulated worlds such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*. In these online environments, locality is unique – it is a realm of space separate from our own material reality. We cannot touch it, but it is “there.”

**MTM:** The context (i.e. ‘anchor’) for *The Vitruvian World* is the techno-social conditions of the time in which it was created. To situate the work requires one to understand the history of the development and use of online, virtual world technologies in this particular period: the post Web 2.0 socially-connected landscape that witnessed the rise of shared virtual environments like *Second Life* for the first time, the onset of physical gaming, affordability of high-definition (HD) audiovisual immersion in the home environment, etc.

*The Vitruvian World*<sup>8</sup> consisted of three sites: the “realm of the *Avatar*” (virtual), the “realm of the *Puppet*” (physical), and the “realm of the *Doll*” (network). An *Avatar* (by the Western definition) is a graphical representation of a user within a virtual space. With regards to *Second Life*’s avatar ‘residents’, the virtual body is a completely personalized and embodied form through which a person interfaces and expresses her will (i.e. agency) within the metaverse, and is constructed by an individual for their own use. The *Puppet* is a hybrid body created by one entity (in this case the artistic team), which is then used by others (in this case the visitors to the physically gallery), and represents a shared state of agency and partial embodiment. The third form, the *Doll*, is a virtual body devoid of any human embodiment and agency – it is a ‘lifeless’ shell that merely functions as a component of the virtual realm (in this case as a data conduit).

The *Second Life* portion of the artwork was a full *sim* created both for avatars to visit and as a residence for the *Puppet*. It was constructed to sense the presence of these types of virtual bodies and programmatically transform itself according to their locations. The *Doll* – as a shell without an embodied presence – did not relate to and affect the virtual world in this manner.

Avatars interfaced with the virtual component of the installation via their own computer systems running the *Second Life* client. The *Puppet* was only accessible in the physical gallery space, where a visitor (through the use a hacked Wii-mote) could assume control of the body and view portions of the virtual space through an immersive audiovisual projection system created with a corner dual HD projector setup and 5.1 speaker set.

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<sup>8</sup> The notion that *The Vitruvian World* was itself a site that embodied the principles of Vitruvius can be argued since the artwork was conceptually and formalistically structured upon Vitruvius’ writings and formulae.

Visitors to Turbulence.org (i.e. the network) were able to watch a real-time data-painting created from live animated image streams captured from the *Doll's* viewpoint.

**Turbulence: If the public sphere is a “discursive site” – a site for public dialogue/debate – and not a physical place (Jürgen Habermas), is the Internet part of the public sphere? Is Second Life part of the public sphere?**

**JCF:** For the past eight years, I have worked on the corner of Tremont and Boylston Streets overlooking the historic Boston Common, the first public park in the United States. I walk across the park every morning. As I do, I often contemplate the role that the town square plays in the shaping of political discourse and national identity formation. As the location of the public sphere, the town square is where we air grievances, display solidarity, express our differences, celebrate our similarities, remember and mourn. This is why monuments and memorials are located in town squares.

In the early 1990s we witnessed the migration of the public sphere from the physical realm to the virtual realm, the Internet. In effect, the location of public discourse and the site of national identity formation were extended into the virtual world. When thinking about this, it is important to keep in mind that the practices of the virtual public sphere have to be invented, just as the equipment is invented.

**SK/VS:** Most spaces in *Second Life* are like public parks: you can enter and exit freely, socialize and meet strangers. There are exceptions – such as fenced off areas and regions, which are only open to certain subcultures – but there are fewer restrictions in *Second Life* than in real life.

However, the contradiction is that a corporation, Linden Lab, owns this environment and as such, it exists only on their servers. Linden Lab can boot out users that don't conform to its standards of conduct, allot resources as it chooses, and even shut down *Second Life*. If Linden Lab goes bankrupt, all of the virtual user-created spaces would instantaneously disappear.

**MTM:** Yes, certainly both the Internet and *Second Life* are part of the public sphere (domain). Having said that, both are manipulated to varying degrees by governmental and commercial powers through various “protocols” (Galloway<sup>9</sup>) and systems of control, and I feel it is useful to think about the notion of what is deemed ‘public’ within this context.

**Turbulence: Is the Second Life component of your piece more akin to the site-specificity of Land Art or unsiteliness of the Internet? How important is the aesthetic of the Second Life environment? Did you embrace the constraints of the aesthetic? Is the Second Life aesthetic “unsightly”?**

**JCF:** *Imaging Beijing* was designed to be simultaneously site-specific and unsitely.

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<sup>9</sup> Galloway, Alexander R. (2004), *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

**SK/VS:** The sculptures were transmuted from the space of imagination, *Second Life*, into physical space. Although the works themselves were presented as conventional art objects, displayed on shelves or plinths in the physical gallery, their origin was clearly digital. The sculptures embraced the crude 3D-look of *Second Life* with its faceted edges and oddly mapped graphics.

The *Second Life* installation showed all of the 3D models in a virtual gallery, along with programmed scripts that provided humor and took advantage of the *Second Life* environment. For example, avatars could ride the Yellow Submarine as it descended below the floorboards of the gallery and as they approached Kryptonite, they got weak and fell to the ground. In this way, *No Matter* tapped into the site-specificity of the environment, much like many Land Art works.

**MTM:** The inherent nature of *Second Life* as an ever-shifting metaverse where virtual simulators (sims) appear and disappear on a regular and inconsistent basis, intrinsically links all *Second Life* creations (and components) to a state of unsiteliness. Of course, real-world land experiences both natural and man-influenced changes; however such transitions usually occur gradually over a period of time, unlike the often instantaneous shifts seen within Internet-space.

Aesthetically, *The Vitruvian World* was informed by the inherent audiovisual qualities of the platform itself – I believe in trying to employ the ‘natural’ beauty of any media-based system.

For me, technical constraints can often be employed as creative ‘obstructions’ (von Trier<sup>10</sup>) within the artistic process. My use of *Second Life* as a platform for creative practice has certainly been informed by this view – i.e. the limitations are often challenging, but the process of finding solutions makes one carefully consider artistic intentions and strategies.

The *Second Life* aesthetic is certainly ‘unsitely’ as it is directly informed by the constant changes in the platform’s technical infrastructure, which alters aspects of the manifested virtual environment (eg. graphical capabilities are expanded and/or altered, authoring facilities are sometimes deprecated or removed, etc.).

**Turbulence: In creating your piece for *Mixed Realities* how much consideration was given to *Second Life* as a site of social interaction?**

**JCF:** In earlier iterations of the *Imaging Place* project (1997-2006), I amassed a large archive of work, with hours of narrative content from hundreds of locations around the world. Although the work was authored in the language of the Internet, it was always too bandwidth intensive to deliver on the web. For most of this time the work was shown primarily in the form of interactive exhibitions in galleries and museums. As a result the work never developed the social and participatory possibilities that were emerging online

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<sup>10</sup> von Trier, Lars and Leth, Jørgen (2003), *De fem benspænd/The Five Obstructions* [film], Hvidovre: Zentropa.

at the time. The widespread adoption of virtual world technology changed that. In *Second Life*, I was able to engage a robust and committed worldwide audience.

During the *Mixed Realities* exhibition, whenever possible, I would log in to the virtual installation from my studio. I would meet up with the exhibition avatar, give tours of the space, and facilitate interactions between gallery visitors and their online counterparts. This one-on-one interaction brought a kind of ritual storytelling aspect to the work. In addition to each node containing its own narrative content, it would act as a memory trigger of sorts, reminding me to talk about particular related ideas or theory, or to supplement the story with additional narrative based on my experience on location in Beijing.

**SK/VS:** The first stage of production for *No Matter* was to hire *Second Life* builders to create the imaginary objects in the *Second Life* environment.

During this time, we spent many hours each day working with builders in the “showroom” – a museum-like house containing the imaginary objects where we conducted business. We forged our own social rules of salesmanship that were specific to *Second Life*. We were heavily involved in this space as a system of exchange, negotiating specific flat fees for each object with hourly pay rates well under those in real life.

**MTM:** Since 2007, I have thought of *Second Life* as a “living space for our living beings” (Appia in Magruder<sup>11</sup>) and, as such, social interactions (and related elements) are certainly considered during the creation process.

**Turbulence: Is there an inherent tension/conflict between the unsiteliness of the Internet and the specific location (web address) of a website?**

**JCF:** There is. Particularly when web locations or virtual worlds are regarded with the same definitional criteria for location as physical reality. It is, of course, not the same. Virtual location is representational, an image more akin semiotically to a photograph, but one that you can enter, explore, have social interactions and adventure in. But it is still an image, a signifier not the signified. I chose to use this inherent tension/conflict to disrupt the audience’s experience and draw attention to the construction of meaning.

All storytelling requires the suspension of the audience’s disbelief. With any film, novel, or narrative performance, the viewer has to ignore the fact that the experience is constructed and temporarily accept it as reality, allowing her to enjoy the fiction as if she were observing real events. Games and virtual worlds are no different. People expect to turn themselves over to a fantasy when they don an avataric identity and enter a virtual environment. When they encounter real people, real places, and real political situations, it can be an extremely jarring experience, even if it is only a representation. I see it as being a bit like the breaking of the fourth wall in Brechtian theatre.

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<sup>11</sup> Magruder, Michael Takeo (2010), '(Re)Configurations of Space and Movement. Performative Extensions of Appia in Second Life', in Brandstetter, Gabriele and Wiens, Birgit (eds.), *Theater ohne Fluchtpunkt/Theatre without Vanishing Points*, Berlin: Alexander Verlag, pp. 60–75.



**SK/VS:** Absolutely. The Internet is entirely illusory. The reality of the web is managed through IP addresses and physical servers, evidenced by censorship in China or the shutting down of the Internet in Egypt in February of 2011. Most people forget this until sites get hacked, governments censor them or corporations exercise undue control over the infrastructure of the Internet.

**MTM:** Web addresses – in terms of both their IP address and domain names – can change in erratic ways, and if one considers this point, then perhaps there is not so much tension between these two factors.

Turbulence: ***Mixed Realities* sought to combine elements of a physical environment with those of a virtual world. How would you conceptualize physical/virtual; as the antithesis of one another or as part of a continuum?**

**JCF:** I consider the virtual to be a prosthetic extension of the physical, allowing meaning of place to radiate out worldwide from a specific physical location and back again.

**SK/VS:** This is a difficult question to answer due to its general nature. In *No Matter*, we gave physical form to that which was formerly virtual. Imaginary objects existed before simulated worlds; *Second Life* operates much like the imaginary worlds created by stories, film and other fictional spaces. Thus, the idea of virtuality is an old one but computing technology now allows for millions of people to log in to the same service and feel a sense of shared space.

**MTM:** Certainly as part of one continuum: although they are different kinds of spaces when we connect to and inhabit them, our consciousness (i.e. our overarching reality) remains constant.

Turbulence: **Site-specific works of the 1960s and '70s (Land Art) demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion (Kwon). Similarly, *Mixed Realities* called for works that were either interactive or participatory, requiring the "audience" to activate or "complete" them. *Remote*, for instance, sensed the presence of "bodies" in both the physical and virtual spaces, alerting each to the co-presence of the other. How much audience involvement did you require/desire? Was the experience of your piece enhanced by multiple co-present bodies?**

**JCF:** It was extremely important. I have years of experience creating physical offline interactive installations in galleries and museums. I have been making Internet art since 1990 and I have created dozens of online virtual installations in virtual world environments. *Imaging Beijing* at the *Mixed Realities* exhibition was the first time I brought all three of the practices together in one project.

**SK/VS:** For *No Matter*, the audience that completed the work was the builders in the *Second Life* community. They operated like independent contractors and though we

featured them on the website, their identities were largely anonymous and for the most part, they had little interest in the final real-life exhibition.

**MTM:** As the artwork was conceived to exist across multiple time zones and ‘sites’, it was clear from the onset that it would not be visited or experienced on a predictable or regular basis. Therefore, we sought to create components and situations that had underlying autonomous (algorithmic) structures that would gain (i.e. increase their complexity) from human interaction. In short, the spectator/user experience would always maintain a (hopefully) interesting baseline, but would become more dynamic and intriguing as the spaces were inhabited (often by multiple individuals). The artwork was definitely enhanced as the virtual and physical ‘sites’ were populated, explored and ‘used’ by visitors.

**Turbulence:** **Given the specific brief of the *Mixed Realities* exhibition, could your piece be exhibited again? Most importantly, would you migrate the *Second Life* component into a different virtual world? (Note, this is not a question about technical feasibility, but rather the site-specificity of *Second Life*.)**

**JCF:** What made the *Mixed Realities* exhibition so significant was not only its underlying concept, but its timing. It occurred during the peak of *Second Life*’s ascent; the virtual world community was exploding. There was a wild-west feel to the place, where anything could happen and everything needed to be invented.

Much of the general population had still not heard of virtual world technology, so many visitors to the physical gallery had never experienced *Second Life*. They simply stepped through the door of an art gallery into a mixed reality experience. This initial encounter was much different than having a friend demonstrate it or reading about it online and preparing one’s computer and going through Orientation Island.

The virtual world community has largely moved on, and so have I. Most of what is left in *Second Life* is limited to shopping malls and pornography. Other virtual worlds are missing the quirky, playful experimentation that defined *Second Life* at the time and made it an interesting place to invent avant-garde art practices.

**SK/VS:** We have exhibited *No Matter* in multiple venues since the *Mixed Realities* exhibition. However, for the *Second Life* component, we have opted to do video fly-through of each sculpture. This has been a practical consideration. Most people don’t know *Second Life*; using the controls is tricky and they understandably get confused.

Because the objects embody the qualities (aesthetic) of *Second Life*, migrating them to another environment would mean re-staging the project from scratch in another simulated world using its virtual economy.

**MTM:** *The Vitruvian World* could certainly be re-exhibited at present as *Second Life* still exists and has not radically changed since 2007 when the artwork was conceived and created. For the future, we have discussed migrating the work’s *Second Life* component

to a different virtual world platform (like OpenSimulator) but this would be undertaken only for the purpose of preservation.