

5555555 55555 555 came about when artist/curator avatar Giovanna Cerise invited me to contribute to her collaborative Second Life project revolving around numbers. The framework set by Cerise was that participants were asked to pick a number between 0 and 9 and everything that was to be built had to be made out of that single digit. Given my preoccupation with typography in three dimensional spaces that is fed by my interest in concrete poetry, I gave a most enthusiastic 'yes' as a response to Cerise's invite and built an architecture made only out of 5s which was exhibited as part of her show in Second Life in the Fall of 2013, sponsored by the Linden Endowment for the Arts.

What was especially appealing about Cerise's brief was the constraint that it placed upon the builder since an easy correspondence for it can be found in constrained writing, a technique which binds the writer by some condition that forbids certain things or imposes a pattern. In the literary sense, this is mostly motivated by aesthetic concerns such as would be the case in poetic traditions that requires the usage of a particular verse form.

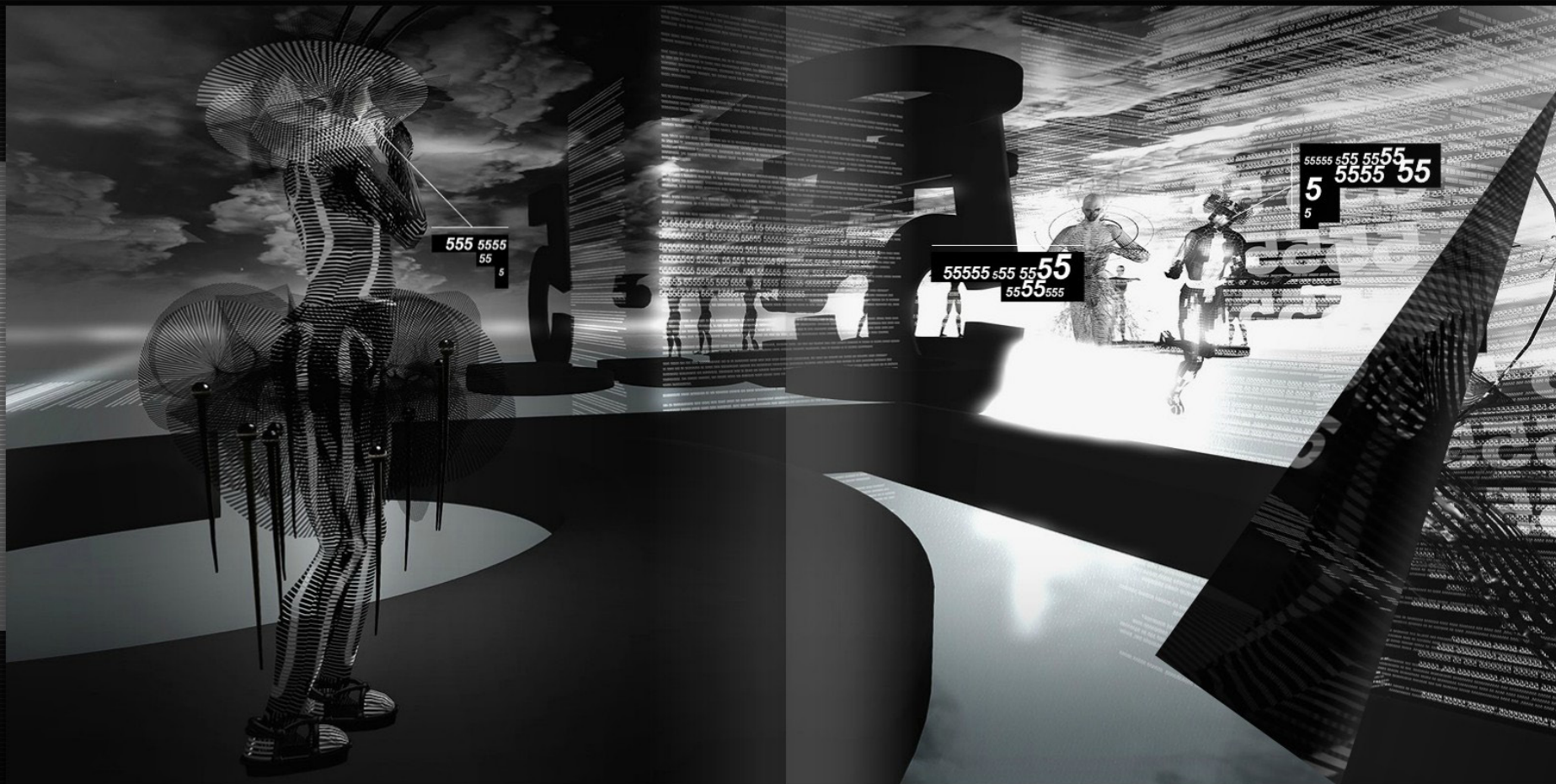
Constrained writing can be said to contain a sense of play as is evidenced in works such as 'Gadsby,' an English-language novel consisting of 50,100 words, none of which contain the letter 'e'; the 2004 French novel 'Le Train de Nulle Part' by Michel Thaler which was written entirely without verbs; or Christian Bök's 'Eunoia' – a univocalic poetic treatise that uses only one vowel in each of its five chapters. Beyond these examples however, Oulipo – a French literary group dedicated to the practice – defines the term as “the seeking of new structures and patterns which may be used by writers in any way they enjoy.” [] Constraints, within this context, are used as a means for triggering ideas and inspiration, most notable amongst them being Georges Perec's 'story-making machines/devices,' as well as techniques such as lipograms, palindromes, and restrictions based upon mathematical formulae.



My professional specialization as a graphic designer is layout. Accordingly, the space that I built might be called a three dimensional magazine spread of sorts, complete with body text, subheadings and headlines. I wondered if text composed of a single glyph would still give a sense of 'content' when placed in such a way, in a logic that followed the typographic hierarchies of a standard page layout. In order to make this conglomeration of 5s resemble as closely as it could to a text that is comprised of real words, I replaced all the letters of a lengthy piece of writing with the glyph 5, using the 'find and replace' feature of a standard word processing software. Headlines and subheads were generated in similar fashion, and these, together with the body text, became the components of an architecture that came out as the result of a constraint. The typographic hierarchy was achieved by placing the body text on planes and by building the heading and the subheadings as three dimensional 5s that were clustered together to form words, around which the body text walls of the architecture were grouped – very much in the manner that a layout designer arranges elements of text on a page by using techniques such as negative space, clustering, proximity and directional axes. These 'pages' were then set at right angles to each other to form the rooms of the building that could be and inhabited and played in by avatars.

However, the project took on a life of its own after I completed the building when I started to think about how avatars would behave if they could only talk in text strung out of 5s. What sort of a world would that be? Would a restraint like this provoke a far more visual type of communication since same valued strings (equal size, weight, placement, etc) of a single glyph would not suffice to express what one wished to bring across? Would, in other words, concrete poetry emerge out of such a limitation? Would text inevitably become a deconstructed artifact whose visual attributes compensated for the semantic absences if our utterances were to be placed under such a constraint?

To investigate I sent three members of my coterie of avatars into the architecture and placed them in an encounter where their exchanges had to be decipherable (even if what they actually said was not) in order for a tangible storyline to develop. The tale is very simple: A lonesome avatar appropriates a strange world where one can only talk in 5s. But then she gets company – which, at first, she rejects since she does not want to share what she holds to be solely her own. But then she is talked into playing with the incomers. Has a good time. However, just at the height of the fun and games “they” turn around and go. Leaving her bereft.





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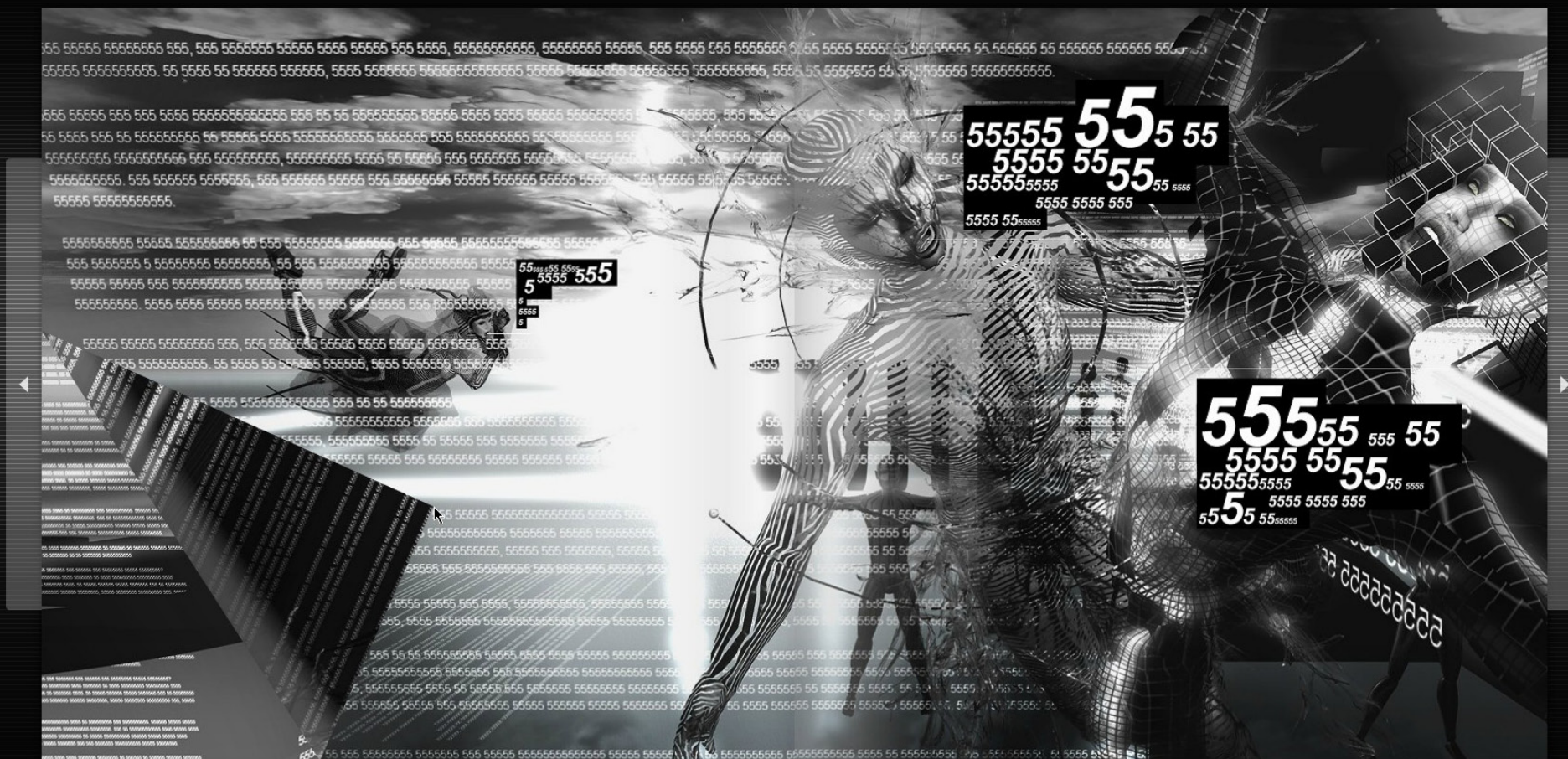
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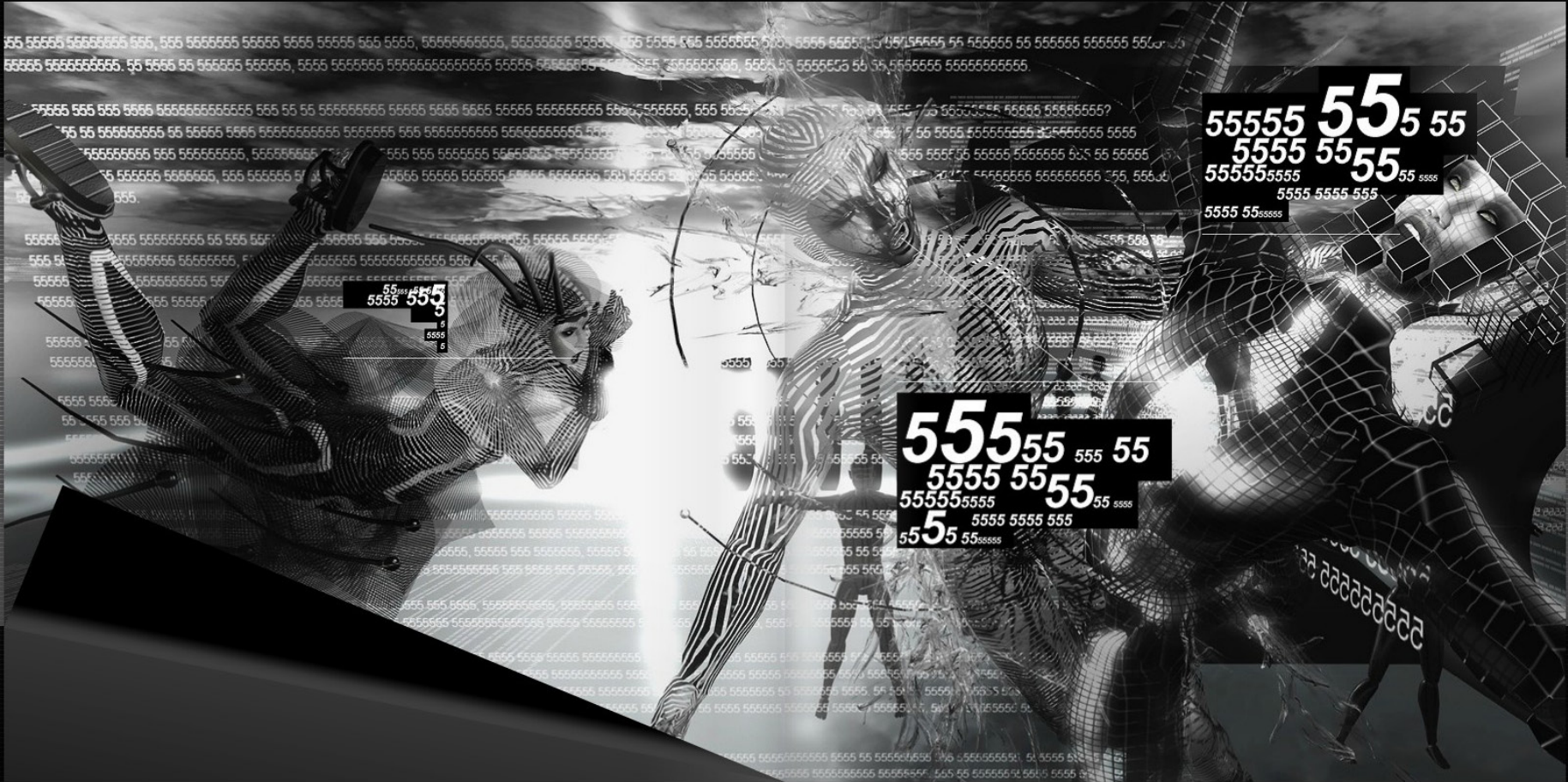
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Although 5555555 55555 555 was initiated as an architecture that could be immersively experienced in a virtual world, it evolved into a project of many parts for which 'frozen moments in time' of the original three dimensional manifestation were taken back to the two dimensional desktop, where they were further manipulated through image editing software as well as other applications: I took many virtual photographs of this storyline to which I added two dimensional speech bubbles (made out of strings of 5 to resemble words) as a further layer. These textual snippets were deconstructed in such a way that they would express some sort of 'emotion' – to make up for the circumstance that conveying actual 'meaning' was beyond their capabilities. Out of these typographically enhanced screenshots were made several displays of the tale since an important part of the playful experiment was too see how I could tell the same 'tale' through different means: A storyboard made with an online infinite grid, a virtual flipbook and a 2.5D application that lets viewers follow the tale through a zooming user interface in which some scant clues regarding the progression of events are also provided. And when it comes to future work, to investigate the audible manifestation of it all, I am planning on making a stop motion video made out of the screenshots which will be combined with sound poetry made solely out of articulations of 5s by three avatars.

While the architecture that gave me the original impetus can still be visited in Second Life, it has to be acknowledged that my interest in 5555555 55555 555 has transitioned from three dimensionality to the flat surface of the screen, materializing as an ongoing online project – what can be called a simulation of a simulation – viewable through a custom website where its components are still actively being collected at the writing of this text .

The project also evolved into a conference paper which was published as part of the SPIE 2014 conference proceedings¹. Further projects and texts may also come out of 5555555 55555 555 since the whole area of text, typography and three dimensionality when placed next to concrete poetry is a very fertile ground for creative investigations.

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