

# Moving Islands [Rafts]:

## A Collective Art Conglomeration in Second Life

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter will discuss both the artistic processes as well as the background and the related theoretical premises of a collaborative art undertaking that emerged as an evolving combination of creative output which was displayed in Second Life® Fall 2013, and Spring 2014. Despite the idiosyncratic, highly individualized nature of its components, the project nevertheless achieved a remarkable state of cohesion. What may have contributed to this visual unity will be the subject under investigation at the core of this text.*

*Since these constitute the background of the project, the text will commence with a survey of the creative mechanisms and strategies of the metaverse, also bringing in Axel Bruns's term 'produsage' and Brian Eno's notion of the 'unfinished artifact' as strongly related terms; after which a description of the project, its curatorial premises, including the usage of metaverse geography and climate as an agent of visual harmony will also be delivered. The chapter will then conclude with an examination of the collective art process within the context of the 'unfinished artifact' and John Dewey's deliberations on the experiential nature of artwork/art process as a potential framework for metaverse artistic collaborations.*

### **Keywords**

3D, architecture, art, art-ecosystem, avatar, collective, collaboration, metaverse, virtual.

### **THE METAVERSE AND COLLABORATIVE BUILDING**

The term 'metaverse' was coined by Neal Stephenson in 1992, in his novel 'Snowcrash,' where real world events are mixed with events that take place in a mass visited communal virtual world, in which individuals can interact with one another in a three dimensional landscape, and through three dimensionally embodied avatars. Each avatar is visible to all other users, and avatars interact with each other in this communal virtual space through software specified rules. Thus, the metaverse is a persistent, collectively shared online world that uses the metaphor of the real world, however without its physical limitations.

The definitive attribute of these worlds – the thing that differentiates them from their counterparts, the gaming worlds – is that these are builder's worlds. All content user-defined and created, and furthermore

the purpose of residing in these worlds is also one that their users have to formulate by themselves: The developers of these platforms provide no architecture and no props, all the system gives is a barren plot of land upon which the incoming avatar is expected to place his own creations. However, and possibly even more importantly, is that there are also no narratives, goals or quests that are system-defined.

It would thus appear that a very good reason to stay in the metaverse is to become creatively active in it, to participate in the building activity that one is surrounded by at all turns, indeed to turn building into a *raison d'être* for a 'second life.' In this sense the metaverse can, and should be understood first and foremost as a fascinating experiment in collaborative as well as individual creativity. Attractive as this proposition may initially sound, it may also be appropriate to heed Michael Cervieri who was one of the first to proclaim that the metaverse is *"a wildly provocative experiment in user generated content,"* but in the same breath also cautioned that *"unlike most 'upload your content and we'll share it in some sort of social media web-2-point-oh way,' content creation in Second Life is really, really, difficult."* (Cervieri 2007) These difficulties relate to content creation as the core of defining a purpose and an identity within, what is after all, a vastly novel experience for humanity – extending one's existence through pixelated, three dimensionally embodied personas.

The model that brings this to the fore more so than any other is Second Life, which made its debut in 2003 as the first metaverse that allows its users to retain the intellectual property rights of the virtual objects that they create within the structure of an online economy, one that is complete with all its instruments such as a competitive marketplace and a currency. Everything created in Second Life, from the formation of its very terrain to the architectural constructs placed thereupon, and down to the vast array of objects and wearables on sale and in usage is user-generated.

Although in its current embodiment the metaverse relies heavily upon its three dimensional attributes, the concept of a builders' world in which participants could create their personal artifacts goes back to the 1980s when 'Habitat,' a text based domain, was launched on Commodore; some years before Stephenson had coined the term 'metaverse.' Better known early versions of the genre however are 'Active Worlds' and 'There,' introduced in 1995 in 1998 respectively. Both of these three dimensional domains attempted to provide building tools for users so that they could create additional content to what was inherently provided by the game developers themselves.

## **Atomistic Construction: The Building Blocks of the Metaverse**

Following this lineage Second Life, the first truly viable metaverse that was based upon a technological infrastructure robust enough to enable building activity to commence in the fullest sense of the term, was launched in 2003. One of the major reasons that Second Life succeeded where its forerunners had failed was the usage of a system of simple building blocks specifically designed for human-scale creation, bringing about a design principle that one of the creators of Second Life, Cory Ondrejka, calls 'atomistic construction.' These primitive objects constitute the atoms of Second Life and can be endlessly combined to build structures, and indeed behaviors through the scripts that can be embedded inside them. They are designed to support maximum creativity while still being simple enough for everyone to play with and use, in other words 'small pieces, loosely joined' to create complex constructs of all descriptions, for a plethora purposes, indeed often carrying multiple purposes all at once. What is also significant is that all metaverse objects exist in a physically simulated world, therefore resulting in fairly predictable behaviors. Such simulation allows new residents to attain an intuitive understanding of how things operate within the virtual world in which they are now immersed by juxtaposing their real world experiences with the novel ones which they encounter upon entering the metaverse (Ondrejka 2008: 229–252).

At its onset in 2003 Second Life only allowed for building through geometric primitives, such as cubes, spheres, cylinders and so forth that were created inside the virtual world itself through a compact, yet

highly versatile editor palette which did not only create the primitives but allowed them to be linked to create fairly complex shapes which could be further enhanced through the addition of textures. This continued to be the only means of creating 3D objects in the virtual world until 2008 when 3D mesh objects were first introduced in a simplified format called the 'sculpty.' While this early addition went quite a distance towards enriching creative output, the real breakthrough came in 2012 when detailed 3D mesh objects that could be created in external 3D editors and then imported into the metaverse made their first appearance.

One of the founding strategies behind Second Life was the notion that the virtual world would draw a cadre of elite content creators whose endeavor would be compelling enough to attract sizable numbers of players into joining the world to make usage of their output (Castronova 2007). This early vision appears to have been well founded as the state of the health of the Second Life economy will readily show. Although getting an approximate number of how many items are distributed for sale or as freebies in Second Life seems to be a somewhat futile effort due to the distribution of this merchandise across a very broad and rapidly changing virtual geography, an idea can still be obtained by conducting some broad searches on the website of the Second Life marketplace: A query for items that contain the keyword 'avatar' gives a result of 633557, while a search for the keyword 'dress' yields a result of 431645, and a search for 'hair' shows 166526 results, at the time of the writing of this text. What is also noteworthy is that the bulk of this proliferation is modifiable, meaning that the next owner will be able to manipulate, change and improve upon it, as well as be able to combine it with other items that could either be of his/her own creation or be obtained from yet another content creator.

While a relatively small percentage of content creators will work 'from scratch' (by creating all of their three dimensional building components and scripts, as well as importing each and every texture and animation that is needed for their work), a far greater number take advantage of the affordances of the metaverse's economy and acquire building components from elsewhere, thus utilizing the output of others to realize their own creative contributions – which in their turn may well be transferred onto others, thus bringing about a seemingly endless chain of creative collaboration in which the previous link in the chain acts as a passive collaborator, a state which comes about quite naturally through manipulations of the initial output by the new owner. In many instances, the new owner will proceed in the same manner as described above – by combining the original work with their own efforts or with the output of others. What comes about can potentially be interpreted as a novel implementation of the Surrealist 'cadavre exquis,' albeit one that is spread over time, and one in which the novel additions are built through one another, rather than as a continuation of one from the other.

Granted – many of the products generated through these creative chains result in fairly predictable everyday usage based outcomes which more often than not closely mimic their Real Life counterparts. What is of special interest to the subject matter of this text however, is that the same strategy of building as part of a creative chain, as a producer, can also be often evidenced as an artistic strategy: What makes the world particularly attractive as a platform for creative expression is the largely unstructured, indeed sometimes emergent, nature of the artistic activity that the first-order user-generated content seems to breed quite spontaneously in its turn: Residents will combine output generated by others, sometimes with their own as well, to create extraordinary wearable collages and environments that have been assembled entirely or partially out of 'objets trouvés.' This conglomerated apparel, architecture and landscape as well as a diverse range of objects will then be utilized as points of trajectories for the creation of involved play/rituals, storytelling sessions, and fantasy role play which then become the incubators for the generation of personal artwork by their participants. Thus, far from being an activity held solely in the hands of an elite cadre, creative activity in the metaverse seems to have materialized as a mass pursuit, forging its own way and devising its own procedures for personal expression.

While a silent type of collaboration is already present in personal building through 'objets trouvés,' yet another form of creative expression that the metaverse seems to be particularly well suited for are collaborative projects between individuals which are embarked upon consciously, with a joint outcome in mind. In other words, while during personal building the awareness of working on something that may already be inherently collaborative due to its building blocks – some of which are more than likely to have originated from others – might not be consciously perceived at all times; in projects involving many individuals working together the notion of collaboration is, of course, consciously acknowledged.

## **Produsage and Metaverse Creativity**

There is an enhanced new examination of this process that comes to pass through building upon (and enriching) previously existent content; based upon telematically enabled creative collaboration, defined as 'produsage' by Axel Bruns in his book 'Blogs, Wikipedia, and Beyond.' While Bruns's main examples to this term are websites such as Wikipedia, which are fed as well as monitored by many individuals; he also takes a very close look at Second Life, finding a noteworthy correlation between content creation in Second Life and produsage, noting upon a "massively parallelized and decentralized creativity" (2008: 1); which, for him, is one of the primary characteristics of the metaverse.

The terms 'produsage' and 'produser' bring together the words 'producer' and 'user' into novel hybrid configurations that describe the creative undertakings of collaborative, electronically based communities where the productive act takes place in a networked, participatory environment that breaks down the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information, artifacts and knowledge – frequently in the hybrid role of 'produser' where usage is necessarily also productive. In such building spaces the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance. Users are also producers of the shared knowledge base – they have therefore become produsers who do not engage in a traditional form of content production, but are instead involved in 'produsage' – the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in the pursuit of further improvement.

Hence, the two most intrinsic properties of produsage can be described as follows: That the output is community-based and that within this community the roles of creator/user remain fluid and interchangeable at all times (Bruns 2007).

## **The Unfinished Artifact**

One of the most compelling points which Bruns raises is related to the notion of the 'unfinished artifact' as the output of produsage: Given that the work involved in produsage entails a constant back and forth between the participants, such output is bound in a continuous process of transformation and improvement. Bruns explicates upon this by quoting Eno, who urged his readers to "*think of cultural products, or art works, or the people who use them even, as being unfinished. Permanently unfinished. We come from a cultural heritage that says things have a 'nature,' and that this nature is fixed and describable. We find more and more that this idea is insupportable – the 'nature' of something is not by any means singular, and depends on where and when you find it, and what you want it for. The functional identity of things is a product of our interaction with them*" (Eno 1995).

While the physical world which is comprised of atoms is not conducive to such extended manipulations of material objects; the electronic environment with its building blocks of bits provides fertile ground for the existence of creations whose inherent nature is to remain in a perpetual state of being worked upon: Unlike atoms, bits remain malleable throughout their lifespan; and even though the lifespan of the bits themselves may be finite, the lifespan of the artifact itself can be infinitely extended by making novel copies of it. The outcomes are creative systems that, unlike their physical counterparts, can be endlessly

improvised upon, altered, reworked, played with and added onto by others; and as such they appear to provide the constitutional material of all produsage. For Bruns the metaverse is a particularly compelling example to such perpetually evolving systems “*since the world remains permanently unfinished as participants move through it, [and] create content... the world of Second Life remains a process, not a product*” (2008: 299).

## DRESSED WITH PRIMS<sup>1</sup>: FROM AVATAR-ART TO ART-ECOSYSTEM

The project 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' was instigated and curated in 2013-2014 by a Second Life avatar named Eupalinos Ugajin, who decided to put a LEA (Linden Endowment for the Arts) simulator that had been awarded to him for half a year at the disposal of a group of artists whom he invited to build rafts that would be in the nature of outlandish floating constructs, or 'moving islands,' rather than materialize as sea vessels dedicated to transportation, as the term 'raft' usually implies.

### Avatar-Art



*Figure 1: Avatar-Art, as exemplified by the creator of the project 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' Eupalinos Ugajin. Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

The underlying concept of the project resides in a pervasive notion of Ugajin's, namely the creation of novel identities through novel appearances, which, within a virtual world context manifests through avatar attire. The artist defines this process as “*becoming someone else by putting on someone else's prims.*”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a large part of Ugajin's artistic practice revolves around investigating such personal transformations through prims in the metaverse: Ugajin's output brings together the ‘ludic’ and the ‘ludicrous’ into aggregations which can best be described as the carriers of ‘ludicrum’; i.e., complex

<sup>1</sup> A 'prim' is the name given to the basic building block of Second Life, out of the combinations of which almost all artifacts of the metaverse - be they buildings, vehicles/gadgets or clothing elements are created.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Eupalinos Ugajin, 21-02-2014

stage-plays, situating Eupalinos Ugajin as their protagonist, who is also the creator of the props through which an elaborate state of enactment is achieved. (Ayiter 2011)

Many of these props are extensions of the avatar, attached to the avatar's body, bringing about bizarre, elaborate costumes that may also hold seemingly unrelated components. These extensions derive their inspirations from seemingly unrelated ideas, phrases, artworks and ephemera which the artist makes no effort to disown, indeed proudly proclaims possession of. Thus, it can be said that Ugajin does not only *"become someone else by putting on someone else's primes,"* but takes the whole notion of creating novel visual identities through associative processes beyond the tools of metaverse building by weaving together ideas and concepts that have been stored in a bewilderingly large mental repository. These ideas and concepts are represented by artifacts that come from the vernacular as well as the high end of technological devices, cultural items and art/design objects.

Noted should be that Ugajin's avatars do not necessarily always have body parts that can be associated with organic beings such as humans or animals. Neither are they easily identifiable as robots, extra-terrestrial beings, or other such creatures that online virtual world appearances are often related to. Instead, Ugajin creates his own amalgam, ending up with creatures that can display many attributes simultaneously – from the architectonic, to ordinary household objects such as radiators, fans and bicycles, many of which can also be placed away from the avatar at considerable distances. These extensions are assembled as visual manifestations of (possibly verbal) statements that may range from the nonsensical, to the humorous, to the somber; oftentimes also incorporating a political stance that revolves around environmental issues, albeit always delivered enshrouded in a cloak of hilarity and hermetic undercurrents/subtexts that discourage the easy readings and clichés with which such proclamations are all too often associated with – all of which also seems to reflect upon Arthur Koestler's definition of creativity, that is one which involves a mental state that can bounce back and forth between jester and sage, bringing forth a creative end product which transcends the sum total of its disparate parts. (Koestler 1964: 121, 145-148)

The 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project can be seen as an extension of this concept from the mere body of the avatar to an entire virtual landmass that acquires an aggregated identity which reflects the participants of the project, coming into being through their combined primes. Put differently, it can be said that Ugajin enlisted the help of those he invited into his collaborative project in order to realize his primary tenet of *"become someone else by putting on someone else's primes,"* as an artistic strategy on a grandiose scale, by treating a virtual landmass as a composite and yet individuated entity that would acquire an ever-evolving, ever-changing identity through collective building – a strategy that despite its seeming contradiction nevertheless possesses an inherent logic in that the avatar and the land that it moves upon are made out of the same material – bits that can be infinitely manipulated and played with; while a further analogy to this mode of creative expression can also be potentially derived from our physical existence in which our homes can be seen to be extensions of our identities, populated with objects created by others whilst at the same time reflecting our innermost beings.

Indeed, the home/habitat as artwork in its own right is one of the major considerations of this chapter and will be dwelt upon further as the text progresses.

## **Moving Islands**

The project opened its doors to metaverse residents in the late Fall of 2013, on a simulator dedicated to artistic activity, provided by the Linden Endowment for the Arts (LEA). Recognizing the artistic potential that Second Life seemed to hold, and the needs of the many avatars who were creating artworks that required considerably more than what the small, privately owned exhibition spaces with which the gird is inundated with could provide; starting from 2010, Linden Labs, the owners of Second Life, set aside over



30 full simulators that are awarded for a period of six months to artists and/or art events of outstanding merit which are selected by a committee. The bi-annually renewed activity that occurs on these simulators constitutes the basis of operations of LEA, which describes itself as *"a collaborative venture between Linden Lab and the arts community. Guided by a dedicated board of renowned Second Life artists, the LEA is committed to providing access to engaging experiences in the arts for the Second Life community. Through its exhibitions, programs, and events, the LEA fosters awareness of artists' contributions to our virtual world and encourages others to get involved and be inspired."*<sup>3</sup>

When awarded a LEA simulator for the second half of 2013, Ugajin decided to share the bounty with others and instigated a number of activities in which he would not be only active as an artist, but also work as a curator; and 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' was preceded during the first half of the grant period by a showing of the 'Bogon Flux,' an emergent metaverse art habitat that had been created in 2008 by avatars Cutea Benelli and Blotto Epsilon.

### T.R.I.M: Temporary Rezz<sup>4</sup> Inventory Mess Zone

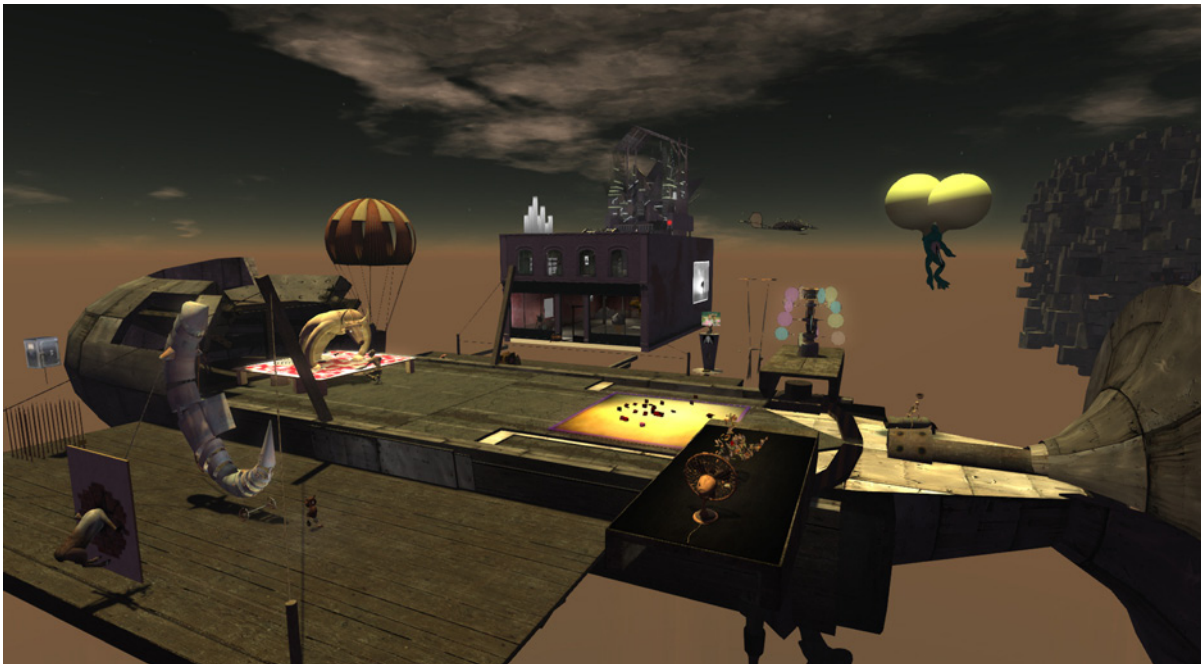


Figure 2: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: T.R.I.M. Second Life, 2013. Photograph by Eupalinos Ugajin.

A good way of understanding Ugajin's idea of giving a landmass an agglomerated persona through collective creativity may be to look at his own approach to metaverse building which is exemplified in T.R.I.M, a collection of artifacts created by others arranged into an endemic habitat which he placed upon the simulator of moving islands.

It would of course be widely off the mark to proclaim that what Ugajin did in T.R.I.M., through the creative handling of found or purchased objects is indigenous to the metaverse, is a form of creative expression that has not been encountered before. Appropriation to this end is common throughout 20th

<sup>3</sup> Linden Endowment for the Arts website: <http://lea-sl.org/about>

<sup>4</sup> Rez in Second Life means to create or to make an object appear. Rezzing an object/prim can be done by dragging it from a resident's inventory or by creating a new one via the edit window. The term "rezzing" can also be used for waiting for a texture or object to load, such as "Everything is still rezzing." or "Your shirt is still rezzing for me."

century art, and has become one of the tenets of post-modern art; to the extent where Olivia Gude placed the concept within her 8 principles of post-modernist art education (2004: 6-13).

In 'Art and Agency' (1998: 30-31) Alfred Gell discusses the found object as part of a specific form of artistic activity, stating that in the idea of the 'found object' or the 'ready-made,' the artist does not so much 'make' as 'recognize' the particular cognitive index of the object. By this account, even the purportedly arbitrary ready-mades of the Dadaists, forced themselves on these artists "*who responded to the appeal of their arbitrariness and anonymity, just as the Buddhist landscape artists responded to their mutely speaking boulders*" (Gell 1998: 31).



*Figure 3: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: Panorama shot. 'The Fun House,' the entry point to 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' by Scottius Polke is in the background (right), while Merlino Myoo's gigantic tower is in the foreground (left). Also visible are Pallina60 Loon's Nautilus raft (top-center-left), Haveit Neox's raft with its wooden crew (right) and Kake Broeck's gigantic pencil (back right). Photograph by Elif Ayiter*

Looking at a related field however we find that western collage consists of reassembling preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image answering a poetic need. Max Ernst defined it as "the chance encounter of two distant realities on an unsuitable level" (Carrouges 1974: 171), a formula that also finds resonance in Lautréamont's proposition: "*Beautiful as the encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, it gives us a remarkable method of triangulation that does not provide measures, but brings to the surface unrevealed mental images*" (1974: 171). Louis Aragon is also remembered as having said that collage is more reminiscent of the operations of magic than those of painting since it hinges on the artist's success in persuading us to recognize the connection of visual elements on the plane of poetry. Asked, if his collages were visible poetry Jean Arp replied "Yes, this is poetry made through plastic means." (Arp 1972)

What may differentiate metaverse appropriative art from its Real Life precursors such as Dadaist ready-mades or Surrealist collages could lie in the purpose that instigated the actual acquisition: Personal experience and observation have revealed that many of these purchases are not initially made with an artistic end product in mind; instead they seem to be bought as toys first and foremost. These toys however, often become transformed, not only in their appearance but also, and more importantly, in their



usage. In other words, it is the play state that brings on the creative mindset, much as it is also described by Brian Sutton-Smith in the chapter entitled 'Rhetorics of the Imaginary,' found in his book 'The Ambiguity of Play.' (Sutton-Smith 1997: 127-150).



*Figure 4: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'The Forest,' underwater installation by Meilo Minotaur. Second Life 2013. Photograph courtesy of the artist*

This playful stance also makes creative output in the metaverse become ‘behavioral’ (Ascott: 2003: 109-123): Far from being work meant to be viewed and admired but not interfered with in any fundamental way, design output as well as art objects are manipulated, re-structured and combined with others as fits the needs of the present user; to suit specific needs - or as is the case in Ugajin's T.R.I.M may be an unexpected by-product of an entirely different activity: *"I was looking for chairs and ended up rezzing a few things, more will come maybe."*<sup>5</sup>

What may however be the most compelling difference is that T.R.I.M, and other such metaverse installations, are meant to be lived in, should be considered to be avatar habitats. Indeed, this distinction appears to be important enough for the following section to be given over to a further discussion of this manifestation.

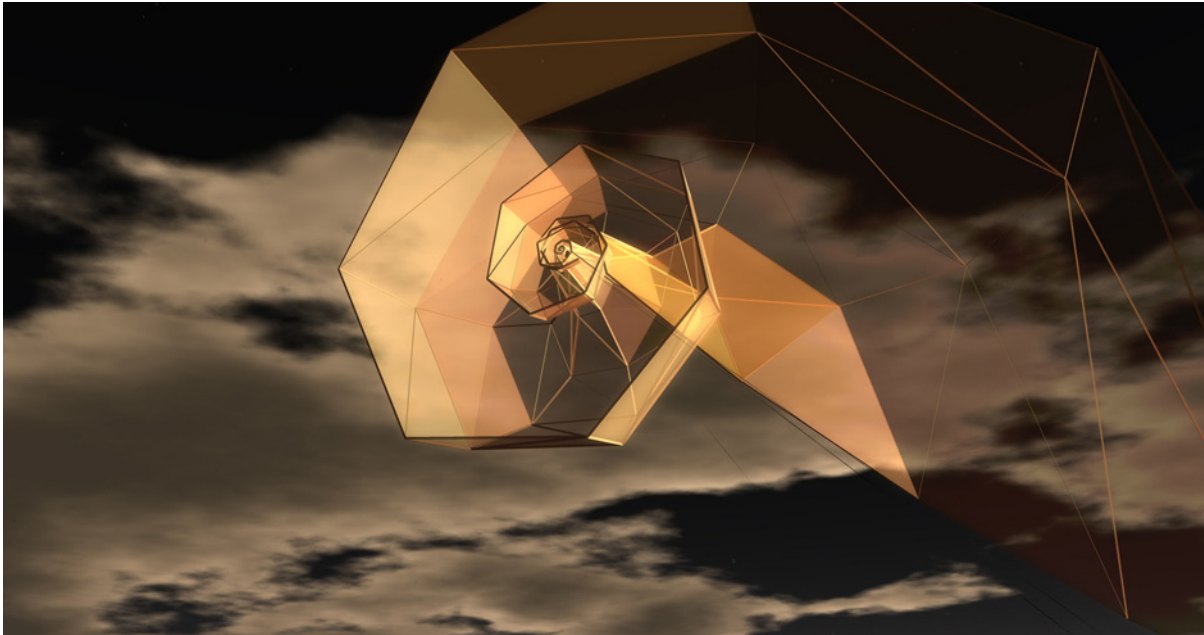
## The Art Habitat

When looking at artistic activity in virtual worlds it very soon becomes apparent that a considerable amount of creative output is created very much along the lines of its physical counterpart; with the objective of being viewed within a gallery/museum setting – albeit virtually. This accounts for the proliferation of virtual galleries and museums inside Second Life to which visitors are meant to come to with their avatars, very much as one would do so in Real Life with one’s physical body; complete with openings and purchases of the displayed work – more often as limited editions but sometimes also as a unique original (in which case the buyer would inevitably have to rely upon the word of the creator that there is no further copy of the bought item). During such events the exhibited artworks consist of standalone virtual artifacts, such as sculptures that are created in-world or virtual photographs which are

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eupalinos/11859647023/in/set-72157637216288526>

presented as framed paintings and more recently also video art which is played back on virtual screens inside the virtual gallery.



*Figure 5: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'Radeau' by Artistide Depres. Second life 2013. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

There is however a second type of creative undertaking to be found in the metaverse: These are all-inclusive art-habitats that come into being through a custom created geography and climate, usually stretching themselves out over an entire metaverse simulator which is used to create a continuously engaging experience, comprised of many interrelated artifacts that cannot be easily separated from one another and that provide a complex visual/sonic system to be perceived in its entirety. What is displayed grows out of its own artificial ecology, meant to be visited and experienced therein.

Such spaces may be thematic, indeed oftentimes follow tangible concepts and storylines that may also be defined as artistic Role Play environments in which visitors are meant to experience the artwork by following up on the presented concepts/storylines through taking on the roles that are made available to them through clues within the environment itself. However, in many cases these ecologies may also be based upon concepts and abstractions from which visitors are expected to derive their own meanings and experiences, from which very often substantial virtual photography and machinima output comes forth, working as further links that constitute the chain of metaverse creativity, discussed earlier on in this text under the terms of 'produsage' and the 'unfinished artifact.'

As a general rule such virtual art ecologies do not have a specific duration or a statically defined appearance; more often than not they will be around for many months, whilst undergoing continuous changes during their lifespan. As is already implicit from this lack of predetermined timeframe, with this type of output the objective can be defined as an invitation for others to come and live inside the created space – to make it their own, and ultimately to become creatively active in it. The desire is that the piece slowly unfolds through many lengthy visits, some lasting for days or even weeks, and that the incomers proceed to utilize the landscape for their own ends – to play in it, and by extension to become creatively active through it on a personal level.

Thus it may be claimed that creativity in the metaverse acquires some very compelling attributes when it is made as a part of the world in which it is meant to come into effect; and the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project is indubitably one such art-ecosystem that unfolds within its own site-specifically generated artificial geography and climate, inviting others to come and live in it and to become creatively active in it.

## The Virtual Eco-System

While the social aspects of the art-ecosystem, its ability to draw in others for extended stays and creative activity, is certainly a very important consideration, what is equally important, and what can be evidenced very impressively on the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' simulator also, is how geography and climate can become highly effective tools for developing visual strategies in these environments.



*Figure 6: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: One of Maya Paris's two octopi sinks into a submarine city placed by Haveit Neox. Second Life 2013. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

At its onset, and for many more years to follow, Second Life did not have a proper atmosphere or a climate to speak of, a sad circumstance which accounts for the many screenshots of those years, showing a cardboard-like world, devoid of all allure, mystery and harmony, displayed under a stark midday sun – an early visual stigma that the world has probably not managed to rid itself of completely even today, when, despite the vast improvements that have occurred in this regard over the years, Second Life is still largely associated with bad graphics by those who had never joined the world, or those who had but found it lacking in visual sophistication and finesse.

Although Windlight, Second Life's atmospheric rendering system that enhances skies, lighting and other graphical aspects of the environment, was introduced in late 2007, in terms of building it continued to be ineffective for several years due to two reasons: The first of these was that until recently very few residents had sufficiently powerful graphics cards on their computers to allow for the atmospheric rendering setting to take effect; and the second was that setting windlight remained a personal choice that a builder could not override. In other words, while a builder could see his own build under the atmospheric and lighting conditions that he/she envisaged, sharing this setting with others was not much



of an option. Over the past few years however, creating custom skies, atmosphere and light for the virtual land itself has become possible and furthermore these settings are nowadays automatically shown by the visiting avatar's machine, provided that they have enabled that preference.



*Figure 7: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'Mythic Raft' by Haveit Neox. Second Life 2013. Photograph by Eupalinos Ugajin.*

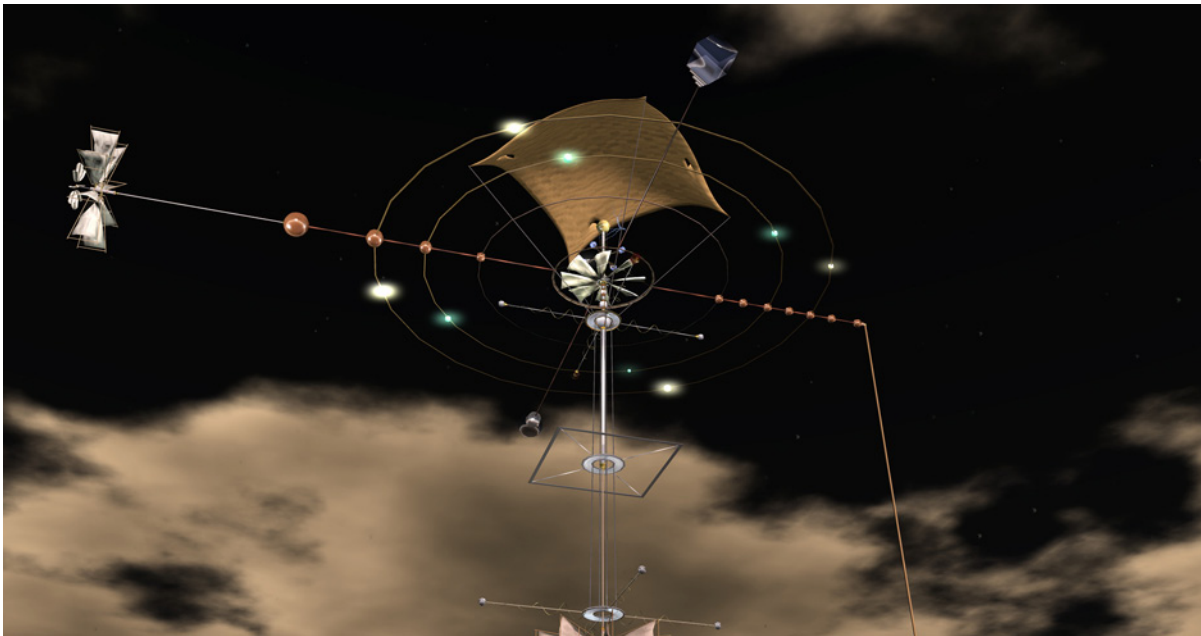
Following these developments, it was a foregone conclusion that many metaverse builders would bring custom, site-specifically created atmospheres and climates into their building strategies – that climate and atmosphere would constitute the visual framework against which art and architecture is placed.

What is an important consideration whilst implementing atmosphere and climate as building blocks is that the ambient lighting slider that is present in these settings will colorize all constructs placed within it to the extent that it this slider is actuated. In the case of 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' Ugajin decided to use ambient lighting as a device of unification: Since the rafts, which will be discussed in the following section, had color schemes that differed to quite a considerable extent, there was a danger of their colors clashing with one another, especially given the circumstance that all of these vessels were in perpetual motion and therefore were likely to often come within very close proximity of one another. The usage of an ambient lighting scheme provided a very effective solution to this conundrum. What was as important however, was that the lighting scheme set a pervasive mood that helped pull things together conceptually, as well: Ugajin chose an atmosphere that was made out of gold, ochre and burnt umber tones materializing under a green-gold sky which set the stage for a stormy, otherworldly, tarnished feel; creating a historic overtone which brought to mind things such as historic manuscripts, old engravings, and classical sea battle paintings.

Turning to the creation of a custom geography however, indeed a milieu reminiscent of sea paintings was very much in the offering, since Ugajin decided upon a landscape that was in fact a seascape: All landmass was removed from the simulator, creating a flat water mass that stretched to the horizon. What made this sea quite remarkable however was that the windlight settings could also be used to create a sea-mirror in which all vessels were reflected, that they dipped into and floated out of in a perpetual dance of collisions.

## An Idiosyncratic Armada

Visitors who arrived on the simulator landed inside a huge red building, created by the avatar Scottius Polke, called the 'Funhouse.' This edifice was actually a pier for departing pleasure boats, each of them manned by a crew of two, bowling pin-like, widely grinning figurines whose boats furiously flew down a ramp into the sea ahead, whilst impeding one's personal ingress – setting a scene for unexpectedness and play from the very onset of the visit. What also heightened this state of expectation for play were the numerous gifts that were placed inside the 'Funhouse.' Once outside the pier building however, this edifice transpired to be festooned with a clown-faced pediment; further strengthening the sense that one had landed in a place of impetuous, child-like, toy inspired encounters.



*Figure 8: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'UFO' by Lollito Larkham. Second Life 2013. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

A "*Cosmogony of Rafts and other improbable floating beings*,"<sup>6</sup> was the way in which Ugajin himself described the parade of eccentricity that was displayed through some 30 constructs that floated, rose and dipped into a virtual sea through a special script that also utilized the z-axis for movement. While some of these were immediately recognizable as rafts – in a few cases even with a sculpted crews placed upon them – yet many others were indeed highly improbable beings floating above sea level:

A fragile, antenna-like construct placed in the sky<sup>7</sup>, a spheroid auditorium<sup>8</sup>, a towering nautilus inspired object which was tethered to a platform floating on the sea's surface<sup>9</sup>, a massive abstract edifice created out semi-transparent colored planes which covered a plethora of boulder-like, black objects<sup>10</sup> were some of the big builds that the visitor was immediately accosted with upon entry into the seascape. Further large-scaled, immediately identifiable constructs were the two large, minimalistically flat platforms, one

<sup>6</sup> Description of the project taken from the in-world invitation note that was sent out to participants of the project.

<sup>7</sup> Created by avatar Lollito Larkham

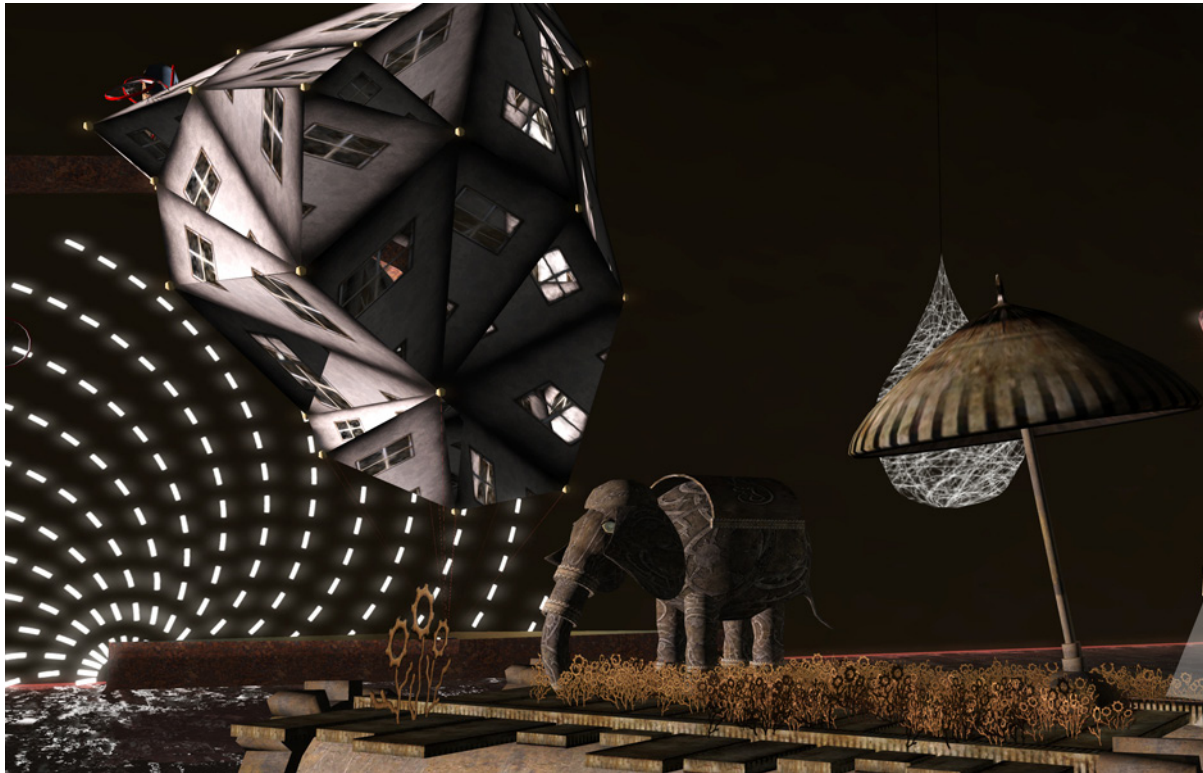
<sup>8</sup> Created by avatar Madcow Cosmos

<sup>9</sup> Created by avatar Artistide Depres

<sup>10</sup> Created by avatar Merlino Mayo.



of which periodically spewed forth pink to purple colorized columns; while the other one was a hermetic surface of green concentric circles, populated with numerous windbags fastened to brittle tripods, to which its creator had given the mysterious name 'Charm Raft.' One of the most impressive of these big constructs however was placed on the simulator by Ugajin himself: A wildly distorted, three dimensionalized trapezoid building moored to a small boat, the title of which proclaimed it to 'Moor the Wind.'



*Figure 9: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'Moor the Wind' by Eupalinos Ugajin (back left) and 'Rusty Raft' by Cica Ghost (front right). Second Life 2013. Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

Moving below sea level – the underwater of the metaverse holds a lot of fascination for many Second Life builders due to the beautifully diffuse, foggy lighting conditions that can be found down there. At the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' simulator, two participants chose to build submarine water gardens<sup>11</sup>, while a third added an entire underwater city<sup>12</sup> – again three builds that should be counted amongst the large and mostly stationary installations.

Floating amongst these big structures were the many smaller rafts. To describe just a few of these: A rustic raft manned by a wooden crew<sup>13</sup>, a nut-shell boat pulled by a fish and topped by a classical chair facing a dressing table of sorts<sup>14</sup>, a big, steampunk-like nautilus constructed out of sheet metal<sup>15</sup>, and yet another raft, this one rusted away into a deep dark hue, upon which an elephant and a parasol sat in a garden of flowers constructed out of gears<sup>16</sup>. And then – not exactly rafts – dipping in and out of the

<sup>11</sup> 'The Forest,' created by Meilo Minotaur and 'Are you Jelly?' by Cutea Benelli.

<sup>12</sup> Created by avatar Haveit Neox.

<sup>13</sup> Created by avatar Haveit Neox

<sup>14</sup> Created by avatar Uan Ceriatrix

<sup>15</sup> Created by avatar Pallina60 Loon

<sup>16</sup> Created by avatar Cica Ghost.

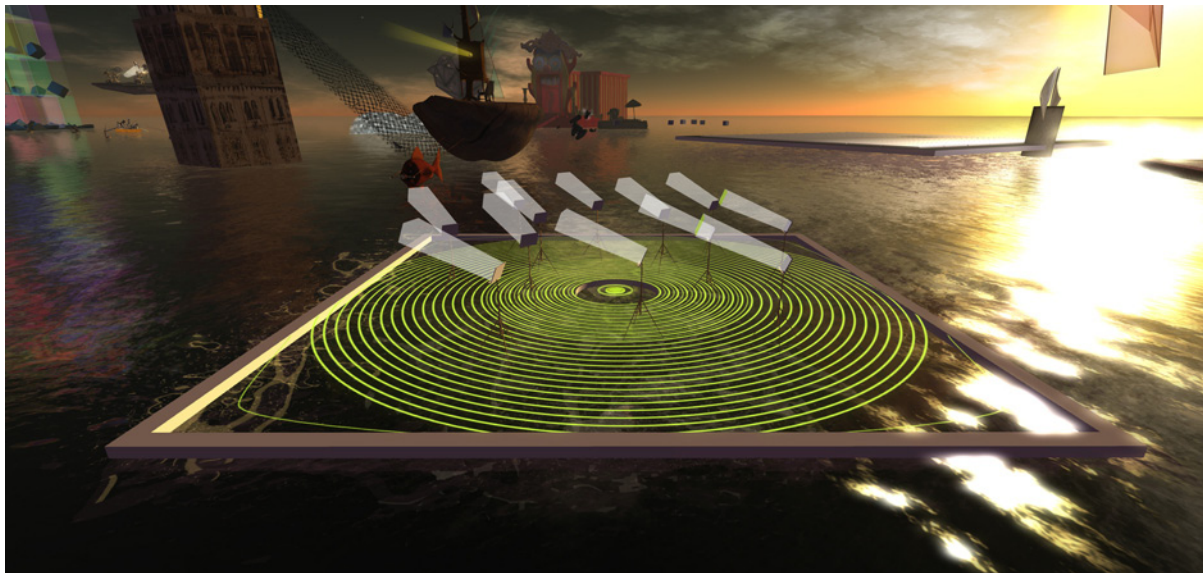
virtual waters were also two colorful octopus-like creatures which were attached to complex pulley systems, and that proclaimed to be upside down and asked the visitor to please turn them over.<sup>17</sup>

## Metaverse Collaborations

We now come to the crux of the matter – the question of how this medley of eccentricity came about, the nature of the collaboration involved in the workings of the project. How did Ugajin manage to bring together such a motley cast of characters to build a conglomeration that transformed a virtual seascape into a cumulative, evolving visual identity, composed of unrelated parts which could nevertheless operate together in a closely knit choreography?

## Second Life Friendships

A good way of approaching this question is by taking a look at how friendships between metaverse builders seem to usually come about, since the project started out with an invitation that Ugajin sent out to a number of his personal friends.



*Figure 10: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'Charm Raft' by Simotron Aquila. Second Life 2013.  
Photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

Although there are of course individuals who join Second Life through Real Life contacts who attract them to the metaverse for manifold purposes, it would be safe to say for the most part avatars who enter Second Life do so out of a personal quest; in other words they come in 'cold' without the safeguard or infrastructure of pre-existent Real Life social networks that would enable them to meet others and form relationships in a similar manner to which these are established in Real Life. Consequently, for the most part, friendships in the metaverse have to be formed from scratch, as Tim Guest describes at the start of his book 'Second Lives.' (Guest 2007: 35-49)

What has to be taken into account at this juncture is that all of the physical clues such as body language, personal affinity, physical rapport and attraction will be missing from the equation while avatars go about finding new friends. In addition, references provided through common acquaintances may also be missing

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<sup>17</sup> Created by avatar Maya Paris.

– at least they may not be there when one encounters one's very first future friend. What seems to remain as a credible means for establishing friendships therefore are common interest areas. While for many avatars this could mean encountering like-minded persons at social gatherings such as the meetings of Second Life groups who cater to joint interests (Boellstorff 2008: 183-185); for creatively inclined avatars a very common way of befriending others appears to be through an appreciation of their creative output. Thus, it is not surprising that many Second Life artists' contact lists will hold other artists whose work they have recognized as noteworthy enough to have brought about the initial impetus of contact.

Ugajin tells us how he befriended Scottius Polke, the creator of the 'Funhouse' pier at 'Moving Islands' [Rafts]: *"I once saw his 'Rusty Winged Totem' in a gallery, edited the object to see who was the creator and found an event where he had it on sale. I later wanted to use it as a backpack but it was 'no modify' so I contacted him to have a smaller version which he sent me. This is probably when I added him as a contact. I started checking what he had in SL and taking pictures of his work, such as the 'Wandering Giraffe,' and he came to visit my installations/builds. Nowadays you might see me in Real Life wearing a tee-shirt with a piece that he made."*<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup>

This tale can be considered to be quite typical of how metaverse friendships between artists are often formed, and it is indeed typical of how the friendships between most of the invitees to the project and Ugajin came about – he contacted them, or they contacted him – out of interest for the work that either party was displaying within the virtual world. Although, at first glance, this does seem to be very much a case of 'birds of a feather, flocking together' it should still not be read as a search for a similarity of output or artistic credos. If anything, Ugajin emphasizes the pleasures attained from the diversity of the metaverse when it comes to encountering creative personas of many different persuasions, working in many different styles and under different concepts, who may well end up becoming artist friends – not despite, but precisely through their very diversity.

Thus, when the time came to pick a team Ugajin decided to look at his own friends list which he felt would provide the diversity that the project, as he envisioned it, called for – not a conglomeration of tastefully assorted, harmonious objects that moved in synchrony, but instead a mutation through creative work that would lead to unexpected results since he was already familiar with what their building interests or strategies were, since he knew what these people had done before, knew that they had very few hang-ups, emphasized play and unexpectedness in their work, held the telling of bizarre tales through objects over the mere aesthetics that these objects might hold in themselves.

Added should also be that, while the first phase was based upon invitations, as the project progressed, Ugajin opened the call to all metaverse artists through a poster in which a list of the names of ongoing participating artists was ended with a line that asked the question 'You?', rendered in a type style that emphasized the query through a lightened font color.

However, early planning went beyond a sole selection of participants, since it also involved the planning of the environment in which the armada would materialize. One important component of this – the movement of the rafts, as Ugajin anticipated it, would also reflect the aimed haphazardness since the vessels would not be moving along predetermined, gracefully choreographed paths; instead they would be taking random trajectories that would bring them into precarious, indeed oftentimes awkward seeming proximities.

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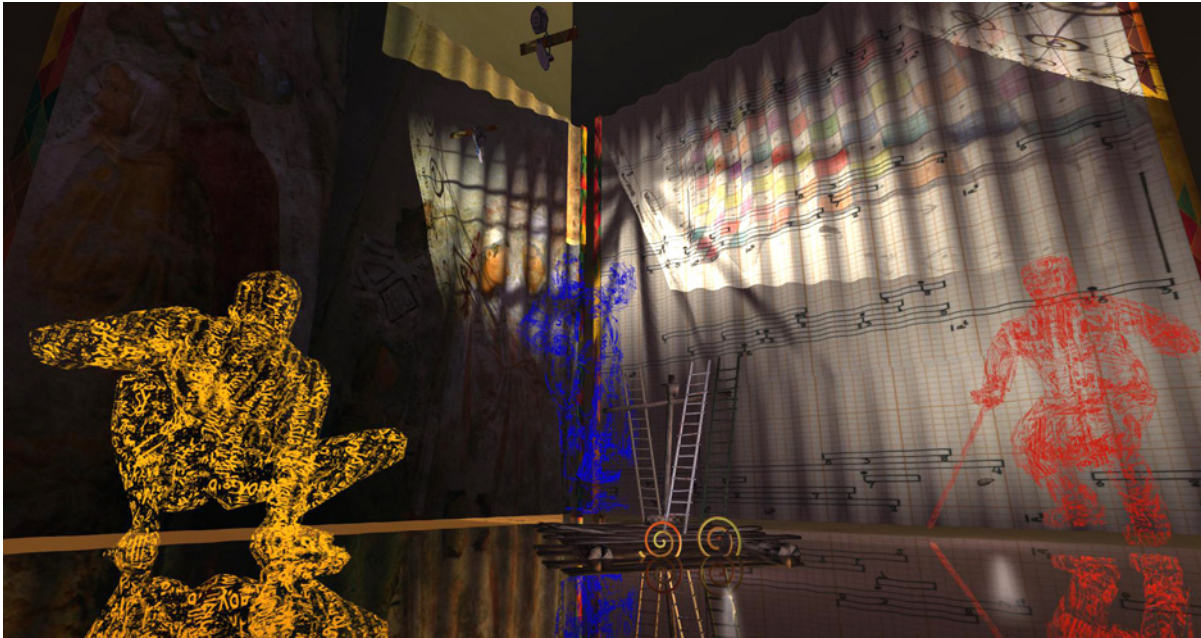
<sup>18</sup> View images of the works mentioned in this quote here: <http://www.multiurl.com/l/kzY>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Eupalinos Ugajin, 21-02-2014



## Seeding the Project: Web-based Collaborations and the 'Sandbox'

The project kicked off with an invitation that Ugajin sent to his friends in early Fall 2013. Of the 20+ early invitees very few turned the call down, and those who did had compelling reasons to do so. The ones who did come on board however were indeed a motley crew and the first challenge was to create an environment of seeding where the participants would be able to form an understanding as to what exactly the curator was anticipating, what the – albeit very loosely held – parameters/expectations of the project were to be. Ugajin resolved this initial conundrum by inviting his crew to an online, internet based collaborative platform<sup>20</sup> where he felt that ideas could potentially be exchanged and developed.



*Figure 11: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: Tucked in one corner of the simulator, 'My Dear' by Livio Korobase was a large static raft that incorporated shadow projections and audio. Second Life 2013. Photograph by Eupalinos Ugajin.*

One thing that may have helped to get the early ball rolling was what Ugajin placed on the board himself, namely images of a loose inspiration that he harbored for the project and that came from a Real Life precursor realized by American street artist Swoon who has created precarious-looking swimming mini cities, inhabited by bands of steampunk sailors, that are being periodically assembled since 2006..<sup>21</sup>

Around this initial seeding invitees began to assemble images and verbalizations of their own ideas and inspirations for the vessels that they proposed to build, as well as commenting on what others were placing. However, it should be emphasized that Ugajin's expectations for the board were not all-encompassing, or overly ambitious. Knowing the highly spontaneous nature of metaverse building, where decisions are almost always made on the fly and at the very last minute, he did not expect finalized products to come out of the board: *"The board was just to start things. To think about improbable floating objects that could be considered to be rafts. I didn't expect too much from the board in the sense of a*

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<sup>20</sup> <http://mural.ly/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.messynessychic.com/2013/07/26/the-real-life-waterworld-project/>

*blueprint for the subsequent building. It was just a way to get the ball rolling, to start relationships maybe, to get a collective project going through exchanges."*<sup>22</sup>

The second phase of the project came about when a 'sandbox'<sup>23</sup> materialized high in the sky of the simulator, at 4000 meters. Here, participants of the project were able to see what others were working upon. A critical question to ask at this juncture would be whether seeing what others were crafting changed individual output. Ugajin, does not think so, cannot recall a specific instance where a build underwent a drastic change in appearance or content after it was placed in the sandbox. One reason behind this may be that most, if not indeed all, of the artists that were invited to the project already had well established careers as content creators in Second Life, had been creatively active in the virtual world for quite some time, having had ample opportunity to develop individualized and established visual languages along the way.



*Figure 12: 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project: 'Rocket Science.' Eupalinos Ugajin is testing one of the many 'instant scenes' by Kikas Babenco and Marmaduke Arado. Second Life, 2014. Photograph by Eupalinos Ugajin.*

Yet another reason may well be that Ugajin chose wisely, and that the invitees all shared his overall vision of diversity as a crucial component of the project – that the very point of the project was to get things that were intrinsically different to move together. That said, there is at least one instance of modification, which came about when avatar Alpha Auer found her vessel to be lacking in narrative when she saw it in proximity to what the others had created. However, in this case also, the modification did not entail an all-out rebuilding, but instead unfolded as additions to her original raft that amplified its narrative potential without in any way changing the essence of the build itself.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Eupalinos Ugajin, 21-02-2014

<sup>23</sup> Experimental building locations inside virtual worlds are named sandboxes. These are sites in which buildings are placed only temporarily, whilst still being worked upon.



## CONCLUSION: A COSMOGONY OF RAFTS AND THE 'UNFINISHED ARTIFACT'

For close to a year the armada of improbable floating beings – some populated with silent sculpted crews constructed of prims and mesh objects, some evincing as fantastical creatures in and of themselves, some containing reflective spaces and some devised as playgrounds for avatars – floated, rose from and sank into the virtual waters of the metaverse; all manifesting under Ugajin's carefully orchestrated virtual sky and atmospheric conditions that greatly aided in bringing visual congruity to a highly variegated content through which the simulator took on *"the personalities of many others."*<sup>24</sup>

The vessels did not materialize all in one day, more and more were added to the initial 15 or so, accumulating to a total of approximately 30, as the project progressed over its one year life-span. What needs to be pointed out is that with each new addition the visual as well as the kinetic dynamics changed since the rafts found less and less space to move in freely, were brought into closer proximity, affecting the overall feeling and atmosphere that a seascape populated with an increasingly crowded flotilla gave out. In this sense, 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' would appear to be much in synch with Brian Eno's definition of the 'unfinished artifact' as an expected, indeed desirable (non)goal of virtual creativity.

Yet another way in which Eno's notion of the 'unfinished artifact' can be approached is by deeming the viewer/audience/participant of the artwork to be a crucial component that extends the circuit to further states of impermanence. Eno describes it through music: *"What people are going to be selling more of in the future is not pieces of music, but systems by which people can customize listening experiences for themselves. Change some of the parameters and see what you get. So, in that sense, musicians would be offering unfinished pieces of music - pieces of raw material, but highly evolved raw material, that has a strong flavor to it already... []... I imagine a musical experience equivalent to playing SimEarth, for example, in which you are at once thrilled by the patterns [] and the metaphorical resonances of such a system. Such an experience falls in a nice new place - between art and science and playing. This is where I expect artists to be working more and more in the future."* (Eno 1995)

As has been discussed earlier on in this chapter, the metaverse can be seen to be a world in which art breeds art, a world where residents can in fact tweak the parameters of what is on offer and attain new, individual results. In that sense the metaverse is an open system that we feel is much in accord with Eno's vision of where art may be headed in the future. When it comes to the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project what may be relevant is the creative activity that has evolved out of the project, and that may bear testimony to the evolving, collaborative and ultimately unfinished nature of the entire venture:

While two of the original builders, Pallina60 Loon and Haveit Neox, took their input into the project further by creating videos that were based upon the output on the simulator, what is probably as significant is the work generated by in-comers to the project, those who had not been a part of the building process itself. Thousands, indeed tens of thousands of avatars visited the seascape given that the project was listed in the Second Life Destination Guide, a portal for new residents maintained by Linden Labs. Since creative expression through virtual photography and video, especially through a usage of pre-existent artwork as the framework for such activity, are wide-spread occupations of most metaverse residents, it was only to be expected that much photographic/video output ended up being generated from the project; and indeed Ugajin has collected some of this work in a Flickr group.<sup>25</sup>

What is especially noteworthy however are the various site-specific undertakings such as the 'Belly of the Whale' project instigated by Second life machinima artist Ole Etzel, jointly with Ugajin. The project invited visitors to create and submit their own whale stories using photography or machinima. The

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Eupalinos Ugajin, 21-02-2014

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/groups/movingislands/>

participating artworks were shown at a dedicated website<sup>26</sup> and were also screened at an in-world party, to which end Ole Etzel urged visitors of the simulator to *"explore Moving islands at LEA20. Reflect on the topic 'In the Belly of the Whale'. Reflect harder! Now do us a film, a picture or a photo story at LEA20. Wear [your] own builds or use existing ones from the sim, create a short photo story or a 120 minute epic film, sing, shout or shoot a harpoon into the last whale! Perhaps you may decide to feel like being in any special kind of belly or to produce your work in that special Cadavre Exquis look? Special Russian dictator bellies floating through your mind? NOW you are ready to go! Give us the honor and donate a work to our interactive extravaganza!"*<sup>27</sup>

Other remarkable ventures that came out of the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project were the various performances that were held on the simulator, such as various concerts and, most notably, a series of performances by metaverse artists Kikas Babenco and Marmaduke Arado. Aside from these scheduled performances, Arado also created a number of performative 'instant scenes' (Figure 12) that could be used by visitors to create further tales of hilarious absurdities.

One important distinction that should be emphasized is that what is being described here as a form of second-order creativity is not founded in 'interactivity' but instead relates to something that goes considerably beyond what this term has come to imply. To turn yet again to Eno: *"In a blinding flash of inspiration, the other day I realized that "interactive" is the wrong word. The right word is 'unfinished.'... [] ... The "nature" of something is not by any means singular, and depends on where and when you find it, and what you want it for. The functional identity of things is a product of our interaction with them. And our own identities are products of our interaction with everything else."* (1995) Such engagement transforms visual art works into experiential, behavioral objects that become crucial components in creating the identities of our virtual extensions, our avatars and their domiciles. We no longer view art works as externalized objects, but rather we live inside and through our creations – we wear them, we reside in them, indeed we become them – and ultimately this is what the project discussed in this chapter has been all about.

Interestingly, the 'unfinished artifact' seems to also have been in the thoughts of John Dewey who, in as early as 1934, connects the concept with his understanding of art as an experiential process: *"... no amount of ecstatic eulogy of finished works can of itself assist the understanding or the generation of such works. [] The answers cannot be found, unless we are willing to find the germs and roots in matters of experience that we do not currently regard as aesthetic. Having discovered these active seeds, we may follow the course of their growth into the highest forms of finished and refined art."* (Dewey 1934: 12)

John Dewey points at cultures where aesthetic appreciation is inextricably bound with day to day usage, saying that *"we do not have to travel to the ends of the earth nor return many millennia to find peoples for whom everything that intensifies the sense of immediate living is an object of intense admiration,"* taking us to a place that closely resonates with the art-habitat, to spaces such as Ugajin's T.R.I.M., to what was possibly his main motivation for instigating 'Moving Islands [Rafts],' to *"become someone else by putting on someone else's primes,"* and then to take this notion to an entirely different level by transforming the identity of an entire metaverse simulator through the primes of others.

The present task then, according to Dewey, *"is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience."* (Dewey 1934: 10) Thus what Dewey proposes is an elevation of artwork from its current state of being the provider of mere *"transient pleasurable excitations"* into once again becoming the powerful carriers of experience – a stance, we believe, is

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<sup>26</sup> <http://whale.boxfolio.com/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://zikiquesti.blogspot.com/2014/01/in-belly-of-whale.html>

shared by many metaverse artists who dedicate their craft to the building of such all-encompassing experiences, as we hope has also been the case with the collaborative project presented in this chapter, 'Moving Islands [Rafts].'

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to put on record our huge appreciation for the work and enthusiasm which the following list of Second Life avatars put into the 'Moving Islands [Rafts]' project:

Alpha Auer, Artistide Despres, CapCat Ragu, Cica Ghost, Cutea Benelli, Derek Michelson (programming), Eupalinos Ugajin, Haveit Neox, Kake Broek, Kikas Babenco, Livio Korobase, Lollito Larkham, Marmaduke Arado, Madcow Cosmos, Maya Paris, Meilo Minotaur, Merlino Mayo, Misprint Thursday, Oberon Onmura, Ole Etzel, Pallina60 Loon, Scottius Polke, Simotron Aquila, Takio Ra, Uan Ceriaptrix, Trill Zapatero.

Many more images of their contributions can be viewed on Eupalinos Ugajin's Flickr, collected in an album especially dedicated to the project:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/eupalinos/sets/72157637216288526/>

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