

**Degrés**

**Revue de synthèse à orientation sémiologique  
publication internationale trimestrielle**

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*Editeur responsable:*  
ASBL Degrés  
ISSN 07708378  
dépôt légal BD26747

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problème interdisciplinaire le transfert de concepts  
opérateurs de la linguistique, à la littérature,  
à la communication esthétique, sémiotique, etc.

## Degrés

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**g Landscape(s) in *Second Life*.  
The (E)motional along Tracks.**

Helena Pires, Ana Melro,  
Mariana Lameiras

We frequently use the term *landscape* meaning a territory, scenery or even an object of art and its representation. In fact, it is quite difficult to define landscape. In a broader sense, it can be thought as the way we perceive the outside visible world. This means that landscape is determined by “the experience and interpretation of the world according to our internal reactions” (Simmel). Above its component elements, landscape is an invention that results from the consciousness of unity. That is the reason why Georg Simmel or even Anne Cauquelin point out the association between landscape and nature, although they are not the same. As far as landscape is concerned, its definition as an *état d’âme* implies the liquid character of an “intertextural” experience. In Giuliana Bruno’s terms, this means that our memories and imaginations, as we pass through landscape, fashion the geopsychic and (e)motional relationship entailed with places. The purpose of this work is to investigate the role of landscape in (e)motional experiences interfaced by a virtual environment such as the online world *Second Life*, created in 2003. Considering that both movement and emotions are particularly shaped by virtual reality, this investigation aims to discuss user’s practices of experiencing landscape along tracks. Is landscape in *Second Life* an imaginary representation with no references to real experience? How is landscape virtually interconnected with emotions and memories? In order to answer these questions, the present paper explores several tracks in *Second Life* through which landscape, as part of the experience, plays a substantial role. To inquire about the way landscape is intimately embedded in virtual strolling constitutes the main goal of this work.

Investigating landscape means inquiring about the way the visible world is perceived. In particular, this paper aims to study virtual landscape in *Second Life* (SL). We suggest that landscape in SL is especially recreated as it results from an imaginary process of refashioning practices of interaction and representations, in its projection into a ‘dreaming world’. The way our imaginary about landscape is reshaped through SL constitutes a subject not yet deeply explored in academic investigation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with a brief discussion about the concept of landscape, we intend to inquire its particular process of *invention* in SL. How is virtual landscape perceived? With which reading codes? How is it (re)shaped in an interactive process? What is the creative potential of (re)inventing landscape and what are the limitations? How do we perceive ourselves in this interaction? Do virtual landscapes reproduce already familiar real and imaginary environments? How is SL's landscape entailed with our imaginary representations of landscape? How are fictional references, such as those from painting or cinema, present in the way virtual landscape is designed?

The main purpose of this investigation is to present an initial approach to the subject through an exploratory analysis of landscape in SL. To do this, we decided to observe landscape along three previously chosen tracks. We hope to suggest that in SL, as in other media, landscape implies a creative process in which our memories, stimulated with an (*e*)motional strolling experience, play an important role. The formation of our imaginary and of our own subjectivities through the interaction with landscape is in a continuously reinventing process. With SL it might happen in a familiar yet unexpected way.

## 2. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

<sup>1</sup> Recognizing landscape within the realm of nature, Georg Simmel (2007: 22) states that "It is no surprise that, in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, there was no awareness [Gefühl] of landscape, since this object as such as not yet come into being with that inner resoluteness and with its self-contained contours, which eventually came to be confirmed by the rise of landscape painting, that, as it were, capitalized on this gain."

<sup>2</sup> "Jusqu'à Giorgione, on ne prenait pas à parti le fond paysagé des toiles, le sujet étant assez explicite par lui-même, ce fond servait de décor, installait la distance, donnait le ton général. Avec la Tempête, en revanche, il semble qu'il n'y ait plus que cela : des arbres, du ciel, des nuages, une ruine, une rivière, et perdus, isolés aux deux

### 2.1 Landscape

As an autonomous object in the western world, landscape denotes a notion that begins to be intimately related to art and representation in the Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. Anne Cauquelin (2000) argues that before this period the term *landscape* cannot be distinguished from *space* or *scenery*, i.e., one of the main narrative categories. Particularly, the author proposes that *La Tempesta* by Giorgione is a quite enigmatic painting that can be thought as a turning point in terms of the role of 'landscape' in the main structure of representation. In fact, in *La Tempesta*, landscape is not just the décor that contextualizes characters (there are two human figures represented) and their supposed performance. On the contrary, if we compare this particular painting with the usual way of picturing human figures and nature, we can say that, in this case, landscape can be perceived in itself as the main object of representation<sup>2</sup>.

As far as landscape is concerned, several preconditions and forms should be taken into account in terms of both perception and representation. In this paper, landscape will be defined from three complementary perspectives simultaneously present in the analysis: oneness, movement, and emotion.

## ONENESS

Conceived as a totality in Georg Simmel's terms, landscape means a wholeness in which "each piece serves as a transit-point for the totality" (2007: 21). First of all, as the author notes, landscape emerges from a 'feeling for nature'. By nature we mean the "infinite interconnectedness of objects, the uninterrupted creation and destruction of forms, the flowing unity of an event that find expression in the continuity of temporal and spatial existence" (2007: 21). This means that landscape results from the perception of the visible universe as a whole in which multiple elements are interconnected, and landscape itself is constituted as a symbol of nature. Secondly, the notion of 'boundary' or of 'field of vision' (a momentary or permanent one) is also quite essential in order to define landscape. There is a 'self-sufficient unity' or a myriad of 'self-imposed boundaries of a given landscape' that continuously strive towards a larger whole.

In classical visual representations of landscape, mainly within painting, the imaginary projection into the infinitive, through a wide field of vision, is frequently suggested. Several times, the representation of a vision of a 'totality,' when considered from a high point of view, constitutes a way of evoking the essential nature of landscape<sup>3</sup>. Quoting Kant and Simmel, among others, Ireland (2009) underlines the importance of a general vision instead of a detailed one of what constitutes the common definition of landscape. Nevertheless, Ireland also remarks that a framed perception or framed visuality is its fundamental characteristic. In this way, besides a rational and ideational approach to landscape, a creative and subjective achievement is required. Human gaze is what transforms nature, by a paradoxical process of division and interconnectedness, into a specific unity.

## MOBILITY

The notion of wholeness, as an integral sense that can be particularly evoked by the perception of landscape, is eclipsed with the emergence of historical fragmentation in modern times. Benjamin's analysis of the shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris (the *Passagen-arbeit*) became a fundamental study for illustrating the importance of cityscape in the transformation of experience. In a way, the disintegrated experience of strolling through Paris' streets can be compared to the cinematic vision. Benjamin stresses the idea that film constructs a world of stretched-out temporality and fragmented space. Similarly, the view of the modern metropolis as an endless sprawl can be compared to the

bouts du tableau, deux personnages qui semblent s'ignorer l'un l'autre" (Cauquelin, 2000: 76-77).

<sup>3</sup> Simmel (2007: 25) states: "Whenever we really do see a landscape, over and above an aggregate of separate natural objects, then we have a work of art in statu nascendi."

exploratory way of seeing how mechanically reproductive technology operates, rupturing life's continual flow of images.

As with the surrealistic universe of 'synthetic realities,' cityscape's representation, especially in films, brings to light a world that is malleable and as yet unknown. That is the case in *The Man With the Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov (1929) or even Berlin, *The Symphony of a Great City*, by Walter Ruttmann (1927). In Leslie's (n/d: 63) words, we can argue that: "Film technologically stretches time and shrinks space, synthesising connections and disruptions." Against the sense of wholeness that characterizes the term and the representation of landscape in a classical perspective, a detailed and fragmentary vision is what entails the modern perceiving experience. Urban mobility modified our relation to space and transformed vision into an "accelerated virtualization," in Paul Virilio's terms. The material stimulus of cityscape, perceived in these conditions of speed and restless in relation to space-time, gives rise to an infinitive imaginary dreamscape. With its kaleidoscopic lights and multiple perspectives, its mass of diverse artefacts and distractions, the city became a site of perpetual *flânerie*. Arguing about the intoxication of the modern, Gilloch (1996: 103) states: "The myths of modernity do not arise from the compulsions of nature, but rather pay homage to the creations of the humankind: the commodities, buildings and machines of the cityscape."

#### (E)MOTION

The material and imaginary navigation of landscape, in contemporary times, can be described as an (*e*)motional experience. Giuliana Bruno (2007), in her work *Atlas of Emotion*, proposes "the imaginative terrain of the emotions," stimulated from the living space, as a "psychogeographic route," a "mnemonic travel," which goes along with the experience of motion pictures. The author says: "A landscape is, in many ways, a trace of the memories and imaginations of those who pass through it, even filmically. An intertextual terrain of passage, it contains its own representation in the threads of its fabric, holding what has been assigned to it with every passage, including emotions" (2007: 11). Taking memories as (moving) images, Bruno focuses on the way inner landscapes are pictured. "Mapping our ways of being in touch with the environment" is what her work tries to enhance. Arguing that motion produces emotions and, at the same time, emotion contains movement, the author shows that a haptic vision (the sense of touch and also kinesthesia) constitutes the main characteristic of landscape as a travel experience.

This point can also be compared to Bergson's notion of 'memory.' Defining it not as the experience of just remembering the past, but as an experience of suspended time, memory is an experience that erupts from the present. *La durée* is the author's term to define the experience of non-linear time, sometimes illustrated by the idea of a past that rises from a detailed and particular material stimulus of the present, as in Proust's well-known episode of *Madeleines*.

## 2.2 Second Life

*Second Life*, created in 2003 by *Linden Labs* (LL), is considered a three-dimensional virtual environment that allows the 'simulation' of some aspects of social reality, or so-called real life – *Real Life* (RL) – where users can circulate and interact with other users in cyberspace through the creation of characters (avatars). As a kind of 3D simulator, *Second Life* allows users to cross several areas of social life in a virtual neogeographic space, recreating fragments of real and imagined geographies of human beings. Residents can buy, sell, build, work, play, live, fly. They can perform a wide range of actions depending on each one's purposes and goals, these being screened or not, within professional or personal issues. The name of this virtual environment means exactly 'second life' and can be interpreted as a 'parallel life,' a life beyond that 'main' or 'real' one. According to the definition given in an introductory video on the platform's website, *Second Life* is described as follows:

<i>"What is Second Life?</i>	<i>Be different</i>
	<i>Be yourself</i>
<i>A place to connect</i>	<i>Free yourself</i>
<i>A place to shop</i>	<i>Free your mind</i>
<i>A place to work</i>	<i>Change your mind</i>
<i>A place to love</i>	<i>Change your look</i>
<i>A place to explore</i>	<i>Love your look</i>
<i>A place to be</i>	<i>Love your life"</i>

*Second Life* has caught the attention of researchers from several different areas, not only for its analytical capabilities, but also due to its wider possibilities and the extent to which it can trigger deeper reflections. It has been an object of study perceived and analysed through different – even antagonistic – points of view. In fact, for areas such as Education and Science, this three-dimensional virtual platform has been the target of studies and reflections from many perspectives. The

purpose of this article is not, however, to embrace all the complexity of a new world that opens into the intricacies of the digital, but rather to cover the main guidelines regarding research on and about SL in the context of Cyberculture.

Identity and the formation of the 'self' in virtual environments have proven very fertile grounds for analysis. In addition, the field of social relationships and interaction is a frequent approach that often emerges as a complement to the first path of investigation, but also as an isolated object of scrutiny.

While being a virtual environment that opens to the myriad of choices underpinned by the digital sphere, this platform has been thought of as a tool that can alter the way the cybernaut "perceives himself and how he relates to others (online and offline), how he interacts in a professional context" (Gaspar, 2008: 4), as well as something that intersects the formation of an online identity and social interaction on the Internet. The way virtual environments affect (or not) self-construction by evolving, switching or reconstructing identities and social relationships is a usual starting point:

"This article acknowledges the growing importance of virtual places and virtual bodies as parallel geographies and performative extensions of self without losing sight of groundedness in actuality and embodiment in the flesh. For the moment (and the foreseeable future), bodies still matter, as does the actual world" (Jones, 2006: 28).

Moreover, studies of SL have born in mind immersion/augmentation theories with the scope of analysing motivations of users and the relations between the alleged real and virtual world, specifically the "driver" and the "avatar," expressions of Paulien Dresscher (2008).

Some studies also deal with the issue of civil society, looking ahead to SL as a certain "type of civil society" (Adrian, 2009), which can be linked to matters of community membership, as well as to the previously mentioned topics. Additionally, there is some work being done on the basis of the community, as in the Phd thesis of Paulo Frias (2010), who analyses the Portuguese community in SL, calling them "new settlers." In fact, this platform provides an interesting starting point for "thinking about social relationships from their spaces of socialization, the virtual environment enhanced by the dynamics and culture of the network" (Faria, 2008: 2), due to its technological options and the definition, still imprecise and nebulous, of "categories such as territory, bond, presence and temporality" (2008: 3).

This central element that is related to existence and identity



commonly goes along with the body issue, giving rise to the words of the platform's creator, Philip Rosedale: "*Second Life* is a second life and not a game." The body – its aesthetic and practical functionality – is a shed that serves as a motto for deeper analysis in virtual environments, for what it represents, for its connection with technique and reproduction and, more generally, with the image. Masson's work (2007) illustrates how intimately the body and virtual image are connected:

"The image must be placed out to make image; separated from her eyes she does not stop this movement of coming and going, from closest to farthest. There is truly a passion for the image, resulting from the intimate and the strange, the outside and inside, the passion that never fails to upset the one who ventures with his gaze. The image shows but also pulls a force, an intimacy (...) The image does not concern us, we do not possess it because it touches us and penetrates us in our intimate by its nature" (Masson, 2007: 19).

The body emerges as a central element in the virtual environment of SL, and so questions arise as to the finiteness of a material body and the particularity of attending to a virtual image, an image which transcends a "simple deceptive appearance" to include also a "force, an intimacy" (Masson, 2007: 19). In this context, Masson proposes the creation of a "neobody" and questions "whether these virtual images are given to see as body, how would they create a body (without meat)?" (2007: 20). Additionally,

"virtual space is a space without boundaries, open to all possibilities. The body is invincible, he can do everything and does not know interdiction, the possibilities of its metamorphoses are limitless. Only the power of *desiré* dictates facts and gestures. The created avatar becomes the model of what it must look like; the model is thus a virtual body" (2007).

For the author, whose background is in the field of psychoanalysis, there are similarities between "that which is alive" and the "artificial character" becoming the "body of flesh," something "subsumed to a new body, without history, smashed of its affiliation" (2007).

Another track of research is related to topics of space and time, which can also be addressed in articulation with any of the issues previously mentioned in this text. In fact, considering geographic space as an 'element' of SL, even if not in the traditional way, it can be seen as "a piece of place" or as an environment "like the real world, only

better" (Ondrejka's expressions), one designed to encourage creativity:

"Launched in 2003, *Second Life* is a digital world unlike any other. It was designed to allow residents to control nearly every aspect of their world. From the shape of their avatars to the design of their homes, from how they spend their time to what types of affinity groups they form; *Second Life*'s design was focused on fostering creativity and self-expression in order to create a vibrant and dynamic world full of interesting content. One of the most important sets of decisions involved the design and presentation of the world itself" (Ondrejka, 2004: 1).

Time is of particular interest when thinking about SL, and some researchers have worked on this concept by considering the different phenomenon that might be related to expanding/shrinking possibilities. Goldberg's paper, entitled "Digital and democratized visuality," addresses interesting questions by pointing to Frederic Jameson's conception of postmodernity in which "the image, whether produced by advertising, communications media or cyberspace, permeates culture and problematises every aspect of the aesthetic experience" (2007: 1). Regarding time, the author stresses that "in dealing with the production, reproduction and distribution of digital imagery, I would like first to consider two different modes of image capture and transmission: *delayed time* and *real time*" (2007).

Finally, there is another line of research that is related to what lies beyond the so-called 'frontier' of the virtual world. Questions arise such as, "What is beyond this new world?" Following these considerations, Cameron states that "ourselves" is what lies beyond the metaverse frontier: "The absence of any 'real' physicality in the metaverse means that which serves to constrain and construe its forms and outcomes are immanent to it. Put simply, there is no 'other side' to the metaverse frontier" (2011: 24).

### 3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

A critical reading of landscape(s) in *Second Life* constitutes this paper's main purpose. In order to accomplish this, the *tourist gaze* and the *go-along practice* are taken as research tools.

First of all, the tourist gaze means a popular practice of seeing. The world is remade through media, and this investigation is concerned with the way landscape is particularly shaped by SL. We define SL's landscape as an uninterrupted field of potential pictures, just as in 'real' world, submitted to conventions of how to look. For example, the framing of the picturesque is supposed to be seen through the canons

of painting and aesthetic conventions. Yet, the processes of becoming a viewing subject, in Gillian Roses' terms, are an especially crucial point of our analysis. The way world is made visible and turned into an object of knowledge addresses the question of subject positions. In this work, the observed world in SL was literally pictured, recorded through a virtual film camera<sup>4</sup>, from several previously chosen tracks. In terms of an exploratory analysis, our empirical goals are to visualize the stereotypical representations of landscape, but also the way observers create the experience of interacting with that same landscape. It is important to emphasize that the touristic attitude this investigation assumes means, as Bourdieu would say, "escaping one's inattentive familiarity with the everyday world." Against the 'real' daily life experience, we suggest that, in SL, individuals became tourists who can voluntarily stroll through landscapes, adopting forms and practices that usually are remarkably banal.

Secondly, the go-along practice can be defined as a lived experience *in situ*. Our experience of the environment, based on the coordinates of our living body, including our bodies' movements, constitutes the sense of interacting that landscape in this work entails. Especially, the walk along (on foot or not) with the audio-recording procedure is the practical mode of analysis we experimented. We selected this methodological approach, as it seemed appropriated to study landscape as a corporeal and visual practice. In fact, we usually take it for granted and do not reflect upon the process of our perception. With this exploratory exercise, however, we tried to inquire how touristic sightseeing is shaped. We suggest that strolling through SL can be defined as the leisurely practice of going to see a new, yet familiar, visible universe. A created expectation is intersected with the recognition of known references, which frequently result from an infinitive process of mnemonic and imaginary associations entailed from the shape of a landscape.

With the film recording, we intended to freeze a particular experience, a moment and place, for a future analysis.

### 3.1 Second Life's tools

- *Region and property*: The maximum dimension of land in *Second Life* is called a *Sim*, which is an island of 256 x 256 meters. If other nearby *Sims* have the same property owners, they form a region or estate (Fig. 1). When crossing a *Sim*, the avatar experiences an unpleasant sensation that constrains its movements for a moment due to technical reasons.

<sup>4</sup> In order to record the practice of strolling through landscape (the investigator's own observing and analysing practice), a film camera was chosen as the adequate way to capture a continual flow of images.

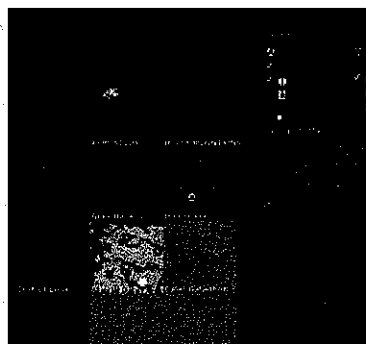


Fig. 1 : Second Life's World Map example of a region composed by nine Sims, *Second Life* © Copyright Licenses, 18-12-2010, [en ligne] Available on: <http://secondlife.com/destinations>.

Landowners define which rules are applied to their *Sims*. For instance, they may allow objects to be dropped onto the floor or the avatar to fly (or not). They manage all the aesthetic and administrative features of a property. If those permissions are denied, visitors can only explore the spaces of a *Sim* without changing it and without being able to overview it through flight. Therefore, residents have an infinite number of regions to explore from different natures and purposes, but are constrained to the limitations existing in those places.

A *Sim* is identified, beyond its name, by a specific address, similar to an *html* address, which in *Second Life*'s language is called a *SLurl*. This is a reference point in order to be able to teleport from one *Sim* to another. Users can save those references in their personal inventories by creating a "landmark" of the place, so they can return later. To search for a place, they can look in the internal search engine by typing the name of the land, or they can also use the recent *Second Life*'s tool, "Destination Guide," which displays a list of places in different categories.

- *Time and atmosphere*: Any user can control the atmosphere through the "Sky Settings" feature, changing its colour, lighting and the appearance of clouds, as well as choosing the time of day from midday to afternoon or night. By default, *Second Life*'s real time is set to the Pacific Time Zone (UTC-8).
- *Mobilization*: Avatars can walk, run and fly, except when landowners forbid flight. Besides these elementary actions, there are numberless vehicles available to use that range from riding a horse to piloting a spaceship, although this requires either the permission to drop objects onto the floor or having them already available in the land. Also, there is the teleport feature, which is the fastest way to transport from one place to another.

### 3.2 Methodology

#### 3.2.1 SELECTION

According to the three types of places we intended to observe (nature, urban and fiction), we have resorted to a recent *Second Life* tool for searching hot spots: the "Destination Guide." This travel guide, available both in world and on the SL official web page<sup>5</sup>, displays a list of more than a thousand remarkable places divided into 70 categories<sup>6</sup> that go from the Role-playing lands to communities, arts, educational, sports, music, history and commercial places, among others.

<sup>5</sup> The "Destination Guide" is also available in the SL official website: <http://secondlife.com/destinations/>

<sup>6</sup> Data gathered in January 2011.

For the nature place, we selected the *Mirromere Sim*, which is a land that belongs to the *Cálas Galadohn Parks* region and displayed in the "Destination Guide" under the category "Nature." The same process was applied to the urban (*New York City*) and fictional (*Science Innovation Company*) lands, selected under the categories "Real Life" and "Cyber," respectively.

The choice of those places, within the list of displayed locations, came accidentally. We picked the ones we found more appealing through their description in the "Destination Guide" and some initial exploration, assuming the role of a tourist choosing a destination through a travel brochure.

#### 3.2.2 OBSERVATION

The spatial unit of observation was established as an entire *Sim* in order to define a parameter for all places. Thus, we have perambulated through the spaces of a *Sim* in random trajectories for about 35 to 40 minutes and recorded our movements in real time. Then, we have edited those videos and composed a second one with 15 minutes (5 minutes for each *Sim*), keeping the sequence of the scenes.

Note that in the first video, there is a personal framing of the space (a certain point of view, perspective), while the second one was compressed to facilitate report writing and analysis<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The research video is available online at <http://youtu.be/vJO91OIKGU>

This part of our paper aims at presenting a set of different reports based on the filmic record in which three destinations were approached. Firstly, our analysis begins with nature environment, and then proceeds to urban and fictional destinations, in that order. It should also be noted that each destination has a certain type of landscape, as will be further discussed.

## 4. REPORTS

### 4.1 Nature

#### ABOUT THE LAND

Local: *Mirromere (Calas Galadhon)* (SLurl: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Mirromere/101/79/31>) *escape to the vast estate and nature park of Calas Galadhon, a peaceful, romantic place to enjoy the beauty of the natural world brought into Second Life. Explore by horse, buggy, boat or balloon.* In the "Destination Guide" description.

*Mirromere* is an entire *Sim* that is part of a whole region or estate, named *Calas Galadhon Park*, which is comprised of nine lands, in which one of them (*Grey Heavens*) there is only a sea *Sim* that connects to the others. The remaining eight *Sims* are: *Armenelos, Misty Mountains, Grey Havens, Mirromere, Dimrill Dale, South Farthing, Glanduin, Gulf of Lune* and *Calas Galadhon*. The last two mentioned are listed in the "Destination guide," although, as they all belong to the same region, it makes sense to include *Mirromere* as a part of *Calas Galadhon Park* destination, and so, validated in terms of the selection methodology.

In this particular case, all nine *Sims* of this region have different landscapes. For instance, some are filled with snow1 (*Dimrill Dale, South Farthing, Calas Galadhon* and *Glanduin*), one (*Gulf of Lune*) retreats into a lake covered by its flora and fauna, another recreates the ambience of a cave beneath its mountains (*Misty Mountains*), while yet another one is an island with Mediterranean architectural influences (*Armenelos*).

#### NATURE REPORT

As part of the same region, the lands are purposely connected through structures such as bridges or caves, through aquatic spaces like rails and dewatering of rivers (using small boats), or contiguous terrestrial spaces through which one can walk. Similar to real territory, the borders of the *Sims* are marked with signs that read "*Sim Crossing*." It should be stressed that the freedom of flying is hindered in the entire *Sims*' region, forcing the visitor to walk by foot or to use the available resources, such as boats and horses.

Having arrived by boat at the observation land (*Mirromere*), we have climbed long paths surrounded by saturated vegetation, composed of grown grass and tall trees (mostly pine trees). The dirt paths have conducted us to watercourses and glades filled with grass, constituting small intervals in the way. These unwilling 'breaks' from the narrowed paths are often intercepted by new elements, mostly animals, such as

horses, deers or raccoons.

The forest here in a *Second Life* environment leads us to a 'nowhere' place. We are not able to identify those elements that refer to a known geographic location in the real world, although, as it is conceived, we could imagine it belonging to a forest from the north side of the planet, considering the shape of vegetation, the surrounding mountains and the animal life.



Fig. 2 : Snapshot of the Mirromere Sim in *Second Life*, *Second Life* © Copyright Licenses, 09-01-2011, [en ligne] Available on: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Mirromere/101/79/31>.

While walking through different spaces, several perceived elements (water, frogs, birds, etc.) were simultaneously followed by their respective sounds, empowering visitors and enhancing a possible relationship of synaesthesia derived from a sensory combination of different kinds (sound and image/motion). In addition, the homogeneity within tonalities, the reproduction of similar elements and the existence of narrow paths, configures some fluidity of space, causing the impression of unity, of synchrony, of integrity and harmonic presence amongst elements, in short, of wholeness and continuity of space.

Around us, the scenery is filled in green and brown tonalities, in which bodies fade and merge with each other, leaving less space for dissonant elements, despite the scarcity of human signs. All the elements are 'naturally' or smoothly introduced which help to proceed along the course, through paths, bridges and fences, leading us to the recognition of them as parts of a whole.

However, the feeling of wholeness of bodies and the repetition of similar elemental composition elements, such as trees, dirt, water and rocks, provide weak referential points. Consequently, one would expect that guidance would be hindered, either by the homogeneity of tones or by the anatomical design of spaces (long and narrow paths and poor visibility caused by dense vegetation). Instead, the remarkable factor

that avoids the sensation of being lost in the forest is the pre-established course which paths design.

The long and narrow trails lead to larger spaces, to glades and watercourses, and rarely cross with another rail, forcing visitors to follow the only way it exists. The courses were premeditated so that visitors would experience a journey with a beginning, middle, and end that leads to the next *Sims*. This point seems to help to explain the reasons why landowners forbid flight in their *Sims*, since they might intend that visitors feel a detailed experience and appreciate the natural landscapes more closely. Without this forbiddance, one would not hear the birds, nor find the vegetation so dense, nor see the pine trees covering the sky, nor follow the water tracks. In a nutshell, we would not be called to the scene, as we are in the outside real world: placing ourselves in the role of human beings.

Placing the point of view at the human eye level, nature is magnified in relation to our body. We gain conscience that there is a floor, a sky and a middle stage, where we wander. Thus, nature in virtual space, as in real space, also takes a symbolic connotation of superiority, of protection (Mother Nature) and of untouchable magnitude, since we are placed to be looking up; it is pure and smooth, suiting the way we symbolize its outer reference. Briefly stated, landscape is perceived as an indivisible whole since each element takes part of a continuous and infinite unit, a perception that is often emphasized by the fact that trees are seen from the bottom to the top and extending up to the sky.

#### 4.2 Urban

##### ABOUT THE LAND

Local: *New York City* (SLurl: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/New%20York%20NYC/181/190/22>) *New York, NYC offers all you'd expect from "the city that never sleeps," like music, art, dancing, and shopping. The World Trade Center Memorial and Statue of Liberty are also focal points of the sim, adding realism to the NYC experience. Start spreading the news! In the "Destination Guide" description.*

The NYC region is composed by two *Sims*: *Staten Island* (a racetrack circuit) and *New York City*, which is also a memorial to the 9-11 World Trade Centre attack.



## URBAN REPORT

As roads seem to be the skeleton of the urban city, the connection between the two *Sims* is made by a road joining a speedway to the city. This leads to the realization that this virtual city was mostly designed for car driving, leaving less space for walking by foot.

Motor vehicles turn out to be central components of urban landscapes, shaping the way we see space, with narrow sidewalks leaving more space to large and longer roads with buses and taxis parked by the side, along with bus stops and traffic signs. Besides being a *Sim* surrounded by sea, it is not possible to explore NYC through navigation. Thus, it is permitted to walk, drive and fly. Pedestrian sidewalks are conceived to access stores, subways and small parks, in articulation with roads, as in real life urban cities. Also, to reinforce the notion that car driving is a central modelling element of the landscapes in urban scenery, the *Sim*'s definitions allow visitors to fly and place objects such as cars from the inventory onto the floor. Also, there are plenty of stores selling racing cars all over the place.

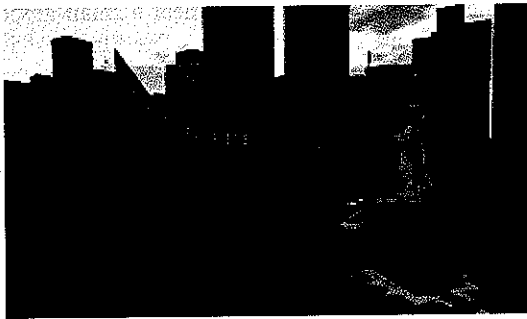


Fig. 3 : Snapshot of the New York City Sim in Second Life, *Second Life* © Copyright Licenses, 09-01-2011, [en ligne] Available on: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/New%20Yor%20NYC/44/102/103>.

Buildings limit the streets and, consequently, the course one may follow. Streets are designed in the modern geometrical concept of parallel and perpendicular, articulated in crossroads at the end of the blocks. Thus, streets form a closed circuit that leads to a circular flow. There are plenty of landmarks, like subways, bus stops, statues, fountains, and small plazas that help to guide the way. This diversity is also expressed in elements of eclecticism of the buildings architecture along the blocks that goes from neoclassicism to post modernism, which empowers memory skills, unlike monotonous similarly toned landscapes.

Urbanity is represented by the visual elements we see in the real world

and idealize to fit that concept, such as traffic, stations, skyscrapers, roads, dumpsters sewers, and so on. In this urban scenery, building walls are covered with colourful graffiti and ads, placed all over the space: on taxis, bus stops and in subway stations. Advertising has a real impact, similar to what happens outside the virtual world, since the market in *Second Life* is also real, due to the microeconomic conditions that allow residents to trade dollars for *Lindens* (SL money), allowing them to buy and sell products and services.

Beyond the visual elements that fit this city into an urban conception, there are ambient sounds that strengthen the visual experience, such as horns and drills. When combined, they create a sensation of chaos referring to a busy world ruled by work and timetables. Besides the multiplicity of the identified urban elements, they all fit into the same structure, meaning that there are no unexpected bodies.

In SL NYC, there are some visual elements that we can recognize as belonging to its outside referent, such as the Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Centre. The visibility of symbols from the memorial of the 9-11 attack on the twin towers is replicated in many elements of the *Sim*. For instance, the fire station placed near a small garden contains a fireman statue with memorial messages. The Statue of Liberty also plays an allusive song when we approach it. And all over the city, there are posters with the message: "We may never forget," highlighting the massive loss of the analogous real life city.

#### 4.3 Fiction

##### ABOUT THE LAND

Local: *Science Innovation Company* (SIC) (SLrurl: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/sick/223/130/28>) wander through the colorful *Blade Runner* inspired streets of the *Science Innovation Company* (SIC). In the "Destination Guide" description.

##### FICTION REPORT

As we arrive to the land point of the SIC *Sim*, inspired in the Ridley Scott's fictional movie, *Blade Runner*, we feel automatically projected into its scenery by witnessing the dark streets filled with neon and video screens, along with a Japanese voice from nowhere giving us instructions like the ones heard in train stations.

The main avenue is large enough to yield no space for a sidewalk, suggesting the need to drive or fly. This is curious because the land

properties don't allow us to fly or drop objects on the floor. But soon we perceive that the roads are designed to ride in a flying vehicle that is given to us when touching a screen.

The presence of the neon ads, traffic signs and Japanese characters are massive. They give life to the otherwise grey and monotonous scenery. A chaotic landscape evokes late capitalism's signs of destruction and abandon: stores, food stores and clubs are all empty. Unlike the market seen in the urban *Sim*, these stores only serve ornamental purposes.

Chaos is also evident in the structure of the streets. The large and straight forms of the two central avenues open space to curve and narrow paths, sometimes leading to building's terraces, bridges over the roads or simply guiding the visitor down blind alleys. These paths are mostly designed in the rear of the buildings, along with dark and dirty surrounding elements, filled with garbage bags and graffiti paintings, similar to ghettos. Although the orientation seems quite confusing regarding the composition and articulation of the paths, there are plenty of landmarks to remind us where we stand. Also, the majority of the narrow paths end in one of the main boulevards.

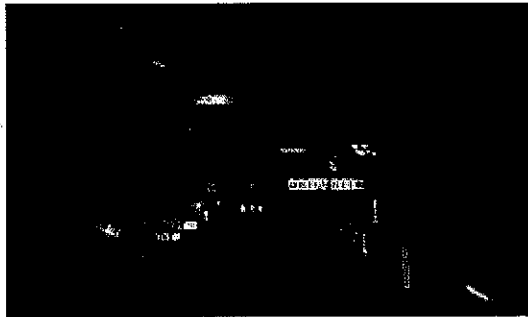


Fig. 4 : Snapshot of the SIC Sim in Second Life, *Second Life* © Copyright Licenses, 09-01-2011, [en ligne] Available on: <http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/sick/223/130/28>.

Besides the urban elements that contribute to the chaotic anatomy, we may perceive this anatomy by making an analogy with the structure of medieval cities through the dark and labyrinthine streets. Thus, the fictional representation of the urbanity, from the saturation of skyscrapers to the highways, seems to fall from living quality to its degradation, meaning transformation.

The avatars seen in this place were mostly dressed up in cyberpunk gear mixed with animalistic figures whose faces were covered, as if they were part of the scenery, combining with the narrative of the landscapes.

Once again, unlike nature and urban sceneries, there are no green spaces, not even a tree. Instead, fences, wires, gates, treadmills and concrete floors fill our view, along with bytes and bits of ambient sounds. It feels like we are in a middle of a terminal city where machines have taken over the place.

## 5. FINAL NOTES

After this brief exploratory analysis, we are able to address two fundamental topics for discussion and further research. We can draw a few conclusions, although they are not intended to generalize to the whole experience in *Second Life*.

The different tracks give a material form to the notion of landscape as defined in its recognized dimensions:

On the one hand, each track illustrates, in its particular way (although not excluding the simultaneous presence of the three dimensions), one of the three dimensions, as previously mentioned: oneness, mobility, and (e)motion. Firstly, with the nature report, we observed that the classic notion of landscape, as defined by Georg Simmel, is corroborated. The different positions of the observer along the track in relationship with what is observed allow us to consider not only the vision of the detail/part, but also the wider vision of the field. Thus, this experience suggests precisely the principle of oneness, according to which the part is always perceived as a fragment of a wider unit. Nature is seen as transcendental and mysterious. This perception of nature as a whole is suggested despite *Second Life's* forbiddance of flying in this specific land. Secondly, the perception of landscape from a mobile point of view is especially emphasized in the urban track. In fact, it is there where locomotion by car is more frequent and even encouraged. As Anne Friedberg would say, the cinematic vision is experienced this way. In such conditions, landscape is framed and perceived similarly as stimulated by movie screens. Finally, with the fiction track we can say that, in addition to being an (e)motional experience, landscape also leads us to collective memories. The perception of landscape as represented constantly evokes our imaginary and other representations. In this case, it is clear that the landscape is materially constructed to take us to a fictional universe, of which *Blade Runner* is a paradigmatic example. That means that this representation opens to the post-modernity model, characterized by its main figures like chaos, fragmentation, multiplicity, hybrid relation between the organic and inorganic. In this case, landscape is perceived as something impossible to be apprehended as a unit.

On the other hand, it is interesting to observe that the conditions of perambulation through the analyzed tracks suggest that it is an

experience opposed to the true experience of *flanêrie*, as conceived by Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. The ways of circulation that can be used in each land are pre-determined and thus constrain the viewer's perception. Also, the way we are intended to move from space to space is somehow conducted. As we previously observed when referring to urban landscape and apparent chaos: "Here are plenty of landmarks to remind us where we stand at. Also the majority of the narrow paths end in one of the main boulevards."

In a certain way, there are some expectable sceneries and representations with which we are already familiar. Consequently, it gives a predictable character to the experience itself. We are not quite surprised as we go along the way. Our imagination as produced by the landscape representation through painting, cinema and literature is redesigned in *Second Life* in a particular but not highly innovative manner.

To sum up, it is interesting to note that these observations are unexpected in some ways. When thinking about *Second Life*'s self-promotional strategic statement, which appeals to "a world of infinite possibilities, of an idealized freedom," our hypothesis is that we cannot generalize this kind of mission to our experience in *Second Life*. In order to assess this consideration, further work is required and this might serve as an attractive starting point.

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