



Kira at Second Life, screenshots

## philosophie heterotop

Unter dieser Rubrik werden Formate, Personen und Institutionen vorgestellt, die an „anderen Orten“, jenseits des Universitären, philosophieren, ebenso wie Philosophie, die „andere Orte“ erzeugt bzw. erfahrbar macht.

# Lessons from Second Life: Collective Hopes, Unrealized Potentialities

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**Second Life is an online 3-D „infrastructure“ developed by Linden Lab (San Francisco) in 2003. It is not a video game, in that there are no „objectives and rules“. It is conceived as a virtual world of „avatar residents“ creating their own worlds. During 2012, I had a chance to teach an online philosophy seminar once a month. There are unlimited potentialities in SL (Second Life) as the creators rightly imagined, but there are also a number of potential problems, as I have observed.**

By 2006, SL had 1 million Users; by 2010, up to 21 Million. However, the numbers declined and today, there are about 600,000 active users worldwide. Everyday, up to 50,000 users are online at the same time in different sub-worlds (which are rated „General“, „Moderate“ and „Adult“). SL has its own currency, Linden Dollars (250-400L\$=\$1) interfaced with real dollars.

The applications of SL are numerous as much as unlimited. It can be used as:

- Social Space (Meeting people, common interests, fantasy, sex)
- Education (Universities, labs, interest-based institutions, classes)
- Art (exhibitions, music concerts, shows, theater)
- Embassies (Maldives, Sweden, Estonia, Colombia, Serbia, Macedonia, Philippines, Albania all had Embassies in SL)
- Religion (First Unitarian Church, Islam Online, Atheists, other groups had their institutions in SL)
- History (1920s Berlin Project, 1880s Victorian London)
- Investment and Marketing
- Science Collaboration (American Chemical Society, Genome, Virginia Tech)
- Work Solutions, Collaborations and Virtual Training

The creators of SL, as well as active users, had enormous hopes that SL would break ground for a new world of user participation, creativity, imagination, collaboration, friendship and global communities. In this state of optimism, many intellectual attempts have also been made; one of which was the Kira Institute. Kira was founded in 1997 by several prominent U.S. professors (from Princeton, Stanford, Berkeley and Amherst College, in the fields of astrophysics, psychology, physics, philosophy, and Buddhism). It is an interdisciplinary research institute that organized investigatory projects on themes such as the "Nature of Reality and Mind" and "Science, Philosophy, Religion". It hosted real life Summer Seminars during 1998-2002, as well as conducting numerous online forums and workshops. Kira had a portal in SL since 2008, and there were philosophy seminars conducted by the professors and numerous students participated from all over the world (all as avatars).

In 2012 and 2013 I taught a philosophy seminar once a month on phenomenology, existentialism and Japanese philosophy for Kira Japan in SL. We had a very nice "meeting room" overlooking a garden and with a view of the sea, and we would sit in a circle. The chairs are already there in the room, and at the beginning of the seminar time, all the avatars show up one by one, like a mist that materialize into a figure. There was a whiteboard in the room and every month I would post a quote from a philosopher (for example Husserl), and we would discuss it for 90 minutes. I used a text-chat format (my preference), although an interactive voice-chat was also technically possible at the time. The participants (10 people or so, also all avatars) came from various backgrounds – students, businessmen, doctors, artists, tech-workers – were all interested in philosophy but they had never had a chance to enroll in actual philosophy courses at the universities. I had never met them in real person nor did I know who they were in reality, besides what they introduced themselves as – I never knew, for example, how old they were and whether what they said about themselves were true or not. One of them I couldn't figure out whether male or female, as he/she deliberately wanted it unclear. I came to know them only through our seminar communications (and as avatar figures, one of them was a panda), and we focused strictly on the philosophical contents, analyses and debates, not the external elements (such as their background, which sometimes became relevant and came through). I would say that so far as our philosophical conversations went, it was quite successful. Being able to focus on the philosophical text and exchange about theoretical points were definitely an advantage. But since we focused on text communications, avatar presence was perhaps superfluous.

However, there were also problems. For me the most cumbersome was the issue of "embodiment". Text communications were fine, but the fact that I never knew or "experienced" the other persons remained a nagging af-

terthought. Identities as avatars somehow made it worse, in that I kept thinking, why would the person create this particular avatar, etc. (Some were wild looking, others ordinary – but do they look like themselves in real life, or are they fantasies, the avatars...)

Beyond our seminar, generally in SL the problems were potentially much more complicated. Especially discussed are the ethical and moral issues, especially regarding sex. There are basically unlimited opportunities for sex, and a number of „forbidden“ sex sites appeared (pedophilia, zoophilia, necrophilia, and others; they are now all segregated on SL Zindra Island since 2009), and it is extremely difficult to control user access. (Should it be controlled? By whom and on what grounds, if all the users mutually and freely under consent create the virtual world? Should such sex sites be used as "entertainment"? Is it "harmless"?) The institution of polygamy also flourished, as were child marriages. (If an avatar marries an avatar or more, is there a problem? It has never occurred in real life.) Gambling sites were also enormously popular but they are banned since 2007, since Linden Dollars could be fluidly exchanged with real dollars. Other morally contested sites include simulated deaths, rape and extreme violence, murder, cannibalism, and others.

Besides the moral issues, there were a number of legal issues, such as copyright issues, sales, "real estate sales", „trafficking“, international laws, and property rights. Other problems included marketing issues; for example, AOL spent \$300 million in marketing in SL, the creator, Linden Lab, spent virtually nothing. Since the emergence of smart phones, the use of SL has declined dramatically, as Linden Lab did not invest in developing hardware for mobile versions.

Besides the ethical issues raised above, there are also potentially other issues, such as the problem of „digital divide“ (who has access to computers and its worlds), the questions of personal identity (can one/should one separate real identity from avatar identity?), the status of virtuality in general (how "real" should we treat it, or is this already an ontologically false distinction?) or to question the very idea of a „permanent“ world without decay: in SL temporality and reality are always as present as one wishes.

Final reflections may include: 1. Real or virtual, similar human tendencies are present (for baseness, for education, for adventure, for experiment), including all ethical/moral questions. 2. Sophisticated technology does not make human beings more sophisticated in practice. 3. Virtuality does add new ethical questions („what avatars do“). ■

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