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Between Snapshots and Avatars:

Using Visual Methodologies for Fieldwork in Second Life

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Abstract

For a Digital Photography degree Second Life presents a unique teaching and learning environment. It is one of the most photographed 3-D Immersive Virtual Worlds with snapshots (digital images) of its residents and locations circulating abundantly online and in the media. Crucially, in addition to offering its own photographic tools, it is a rich social space with many possibilities for art-based photographic research. However, in spite of the large community of educators now working in Second Life and the increasing number of universities extending their presences in-world, pedagogical frameworks to bring art and media students for fieldwork in Second Life are still relatively rare and educators wanting to explore creative approaches may find themselves in a situation similar to other "newbies": with a dressed up avatar...but nowhere to go! This paper addresses this issue with a discussion of a case study that fostered collaborative learning in a Second Life photography-based research project. We delineate the use of photographic tools available in Second Life to both capture and display images and describe the activities used for situated ethnographic work. This experiment demonstrates a good example of how to use Second Life for supporting group discussion and interaction through the development of interactive objects. The results also show the potential of Second Life for researching into subcultures and promoting students to consider broader ethical issues when conducting photo-based fieldwork in Second Life and other environments.

Keywords: Second Life; photography; immersive virtual worlds; education.

Between Snapshots and Avatars:
Using Visual Methodologies for Fieldwork in Second Life

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In-world snapshots from the digital photography study in the Media Zoo http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=2422

Current media interest for 3-D Immersive Virtual Worlds (IVWs), such as Second Life, are visible in the headlines (Good, 2008; CNN, 2008), exploring the differences between in-world avatars and their first life counterparts, contrasting life styles based on diversity of looks and leisure pursuits, whilst revealing a rich area of research on issues of digital representation of the self. Second Life appears in this sense as a prolific site for research on the 'postmodern "persona"' (Shields, 1992) and the fluidity of its identity construction, moving between a succession of 'site-specific' gatherings, and whose 'multiple identifications form a *dramatic personae* - a self which can no longer be simplistically theorized as unified' (p. 16).

At London South Bank University, the Digital Photography course has been working on a Photographic Index since 2007, a photographic project on youth cultures and contemporary notions of subcultures, exploring through photographic fieldwork and ethnographic methodologies, the way artists can engage with documentation of young people's cultural practices, both online and off-line. More recently, as a result of collaboration with the University of Leicester's Beyond Distance Research Alliance MOOSE project (MOdelling Of Secondlife Environments), a pilot case study was developed, using the tools of photographic representation to research subcultures within the medium of online 3-D IVWs.

The University of Leicester opened up its Media Zoo Island in Second Life in December 2007. The space provides an open ground specifically set up to demonstrate the educational potential of emerging technologies like Second Life and to research the pedagogic options to successfully integrate IVWs into education. By enabling small, pilot groups of students and staff to experiment in their own subject areas, it provides the possibility for a type of exploratory learning described by Jenning and Collins (2008) as characteristic of the Operative Virtual Campus. The Media Zoo Island is set in close contact with vegetation and animal life and there, one can find display screens that stream media in open spaces, side by side with vast domes created as sheltered areas for creative studio workshops.

This paper reports the findings of a pilot study that examines how working in such an environment can provide opportunities to foster collaborative learning in a photography-based research project.

Background

The academic community shows strong interest in the use of 3-D IVWs for education (JISC, 2007a; 2007b; Eduserve Symposium, 2007). The Horizon Report of 2007 forecasts that 3-D environments will have "strong potential for teaching and learning," and become "closer to the mainstream education year by year" (EDUCAUSE, 2007, p. 25). However, these environments usually developed for gaming, recreation, and entertainment are little researched in terms of their educational uses. We urgently need to identify affordances of these environments for learning.

Research into Second Life and other 3-D IVWs identify several areas that can be particularly beneficial for education. First of all, as social environments, they offer opportunities for socialisation and collaboration. Dickey's (2005) research shows that 3-D environments afford a collaborative learning experience, and foster a sense of place, presence, and community. Jarmon and Sanchez (2008) report that a shared virtual environment enables the creation of a community of practice, with an increasing level of productive collaboration. Bronack, Riedl, Tashner, and Greene's (2006) study of a 3-D virtual campus suggests that "virtual worlds offer participants a sense of presence, immediacy, movement, artefacts, and communication unavailable within traditional Internet-based learning environments."

Second Life is particularly suitable when the activity involves role-playing (Gao, Noh, & Koehler, 2008; Berger, 2008). This is very useful for medical and health education (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007). Second Life offers simulation (Berger), for example, how mountains are formed, how a car is built on an assembly line, how to use a piece of equipment or instrument; and simulate how to run a business, sell products, provide services (Antonacci & Modaress, 2005). Another area Second Life is good at is collaboratively creating objects (Boulos et al.). Livingstone and Kemp (2006) identify the potential of Second Life in development of re-usable learning objects and building collaborative tools.

Studies that look at the potential of Second Life to develop group work emphasise the possibilities for fieldwork, as opposed to virtual traditional classrooms, this implying a socially situated constructivist pedagogical framework. Hobbs, Gordon, & Brown (2006) write that the social characteristics of the virtual world can be explored by students through collaborative tasks such as field trips and other opportunities for interaction and communication with the extended online community, and beyond the virtual classroom "where learning is achieved by exploration, reflection and collaboration."

Whilst the authors report this approach within a computer science curriculum, the use of fieldwork in 3-D IVWs (e.g. Everquest, World of Warcraft, and Second Life), namely, ethnographic methods to teach new media critical theory to undergraduate students is described by Delwiche (2006) in the context of a communication course. Working in a situated learning theory framework, the author emphasises the view of 3-D IWVs as social spaces arguing that they "are living, breathing textbooks that provide

students with first-hand exposure to critical theory and professional practice." The study concludes that it is by building bridges between the domain of the game world and an overlapping domain of students own professional interest and practice that game-based assignments can be most effective.

The Case Study

The course Photographic Index has been designed to teach visual methodologies to first year digital photography students and develop photographic work around the theme of youth cultures and subcultures. It was launched in 2007 in the Arts, Media, and English Department of London South Bank University. The course has since developed work around young subcultures both offline and online, from the study of young Muslim girls in London's East End, London's South Bank skate boarders and BMX riders, to online pop cosmopolitan and fandom communities (Photographic Index, 2007–2009).

Through art and photo-based research, students explore critical cultural theories, with a particular focus on studies of youth cultures. We review earlier subcultural theory, as developed by Dick Hebdige (1988) and its sociological explanations of the relationship between social class, street fashion, style, and the ambiguous politics of youth as a spectacle, translating "the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light." We also look into current cultural theories, and its more fluid concepts of tribes (Maffesoli, 1996), neo-tribes and life styles, referring to "a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through life styles that favour appearance and form" (Bennett, 1999).

In terms of visual methodologies, the classical documentary practices, with its alignment with potentially repressive identification photography, such as those used by the surveillance systems to identify the "deviant body" and described by Sekula (1992), are contrasted with other ways of doing research. Ethnographic methods, as used in practice-based art research, have been introduced as they offer an alternative paradigm, with its focus on participatory approaches, the reliance on fieldwork, and the use of photography supplemented with interviews and personal documents, as a way to shift the unequal power relations between photographer and subjects.

In 2008, an online pilot was introduced for this course and was thus moderated in Second Life. As previously noted, ethnographic methods have been used to research critical theory with undergraduate journalism and game-design students. Additionally, an anthropological study of Second Life culture has been undertaken by Boellstorff (2008), who writes about participant-observation in Second Life. The author goes as far as equating culture with the virtual, defending that the challenge of ethnography in Second Life consists in capturing the daily life, not necessarily the unique memorable moments that make it into the headlines but the way its residents go about creating day to day identities in a virtual world.

Adopting critical subcultural theory, Bakioglu (2008) is another author researching emergent griefer subcultures in Second Life. Departing from Dick Hebdige's

definition of subcultures, and his description of dissent subcultures that use spectacular fashion to display their objections to dominant culture, the author claims that "the performative activities of griefer groups designate a vernacular creativity that establish the cultural capital necessary to constitute them as a legitimate subculture in which (as it had been in the punk culture) spectacle takes a prominent role."

Placed within this debate and research on youth cultures and subcultures, and other reports of artists using a practice-based art research approach in Second Life (Nash, 2007), our pilot study aimed at finding if we could extend our current course on youth cultures into Second Life. Six students from the BA in Digital Photography (Year 2) participated in the pilot study. They attended three 2-hour group sessions, meeting face to face in the media-lab on campus, to work synchronously in Second Life.

We wanted to research:

- If the 3-D IVW of Second Life provides the adequate teaching and learning environment to teach a Digital Photography course in relation to research into youth cultures and subcultures;
- What kind of activities can be developed to facilitate collaborative group work and reflective learning;
- How can the learning outcomes, assessment and feedback be articulated in a way that reflects an authentic and student-centred perspective?

The learning outcomes related to the broader aim of training students to integrate ethnographic practices into the research phase of the photographic project. The methodologies when used in new media art research practice are characterised by these aspects (Genzuk, 2003):

- The use of fieldwork, which "relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation" (thus being also called participant-observation.) The purpose is to develop an insider's view of what is happening. This means that the researcher not only sees what is happening but also "feels" what it is like to be part of the group and the culture;
- The development of a multimodal process of data collection, to conduct photo-research inside Second Life, experimenting with one of the photographic options available, the snapshot tool, and one of the communicating devices available, the chat tool, adding photo diaries, observation, and interviewing, "to generate new analytic insights by engaging in interactive, team exploration of often subtle arenas of human difference and similarity";
- The awareness of the ethical aspects of working with others, doing photographic research that is collaborative, participatory, and sensitive to the needs of the group or community.

Before the first session, participants were e-mailed an introduction pack, which included the document *Second Life: Guide for Learning* prepared for the MOOSE project (Wheeler & Salmon, 2008). The guide has three parts with related links and YouTube videos as additional visual learning tutorials.

Part one of the guide takes first time Second Life visitors through the initial steps in setting up their account and creating their avatar. Part two, reviews the basic skills required to operate in Second Life successfully, including familiarisation with the Media Zoo, whilst part three is about taking part in a group for learning in Second Life; describing group roles for avatars, and the use of in-world communication tools, such as audio and text chat, personal IM, and presentations. This section also includes a description of techniques for group building, to encourage participants into having a productive contribution to the group process.

Figure 1: Second Life Training in the Media Zoo

Figure 1 shows the initial in-world training that took place in the Media Zoo in Second Life. This included both students and members of staff.

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2425&g2_serialNumber=2

SL-tivities

To structure the group work and facilitate a mixed use of individual and collaborative tasks, three Second Life based learning activities or SL-tivities (Wheeler, Nie, & Salmon, 2008) were developed for this project. These consisted of photographic-research assignments, mapped onto the three key features of Salmon (2004) tripartite e-moderation model, containing: (1) the purpose or spark—a small piece of information that works as the stimulus or challenge; (2) the task—the in-world activity that involves a photographic activity and the sharing of the result; (3) the response—a participatory element that involves the group reflecting together and giving feedback to each other's contributions.

In SL-tivity 1 (week 1) "Snapshot Tools in Second Life," the purpose was to introduce participants to the basic use of the snapshot tool and photography as a social practice in Second Life, which are important skills in making new in-world friends and
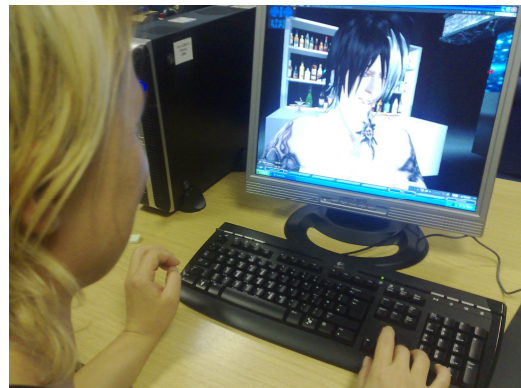

Figure 2: Developing Second Life Camera Controls

using photography for ethnographic fieldwork.

Figure 2 shows a student practicing the camera controls to take a close-up snapshot of an avatar in Second Life.

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2440&g2_serialNumber=2

The first task was to learn how to use the snapshot tool and to save snapshots to a disk. Participants started by snapping their way around the Media Zoo and then when confident venturing into further explorations of other Second Life territories. The aim was to introduce students to other people's avatars and the exciting subcultures; some of which are well known for their vibrant looks and fashion styles.

Being creative with tools also means practicing with the point of view to get more "cinematic shots," so participants needed to feel comfortable to experiment with different ways of using the camera and snapshot tools to create the most stunning images. The aim was to take 6 to 12 snapshots that reflected their first experiences of Second Life. Students were encouraged use the text chat to participate in a discussion in which each explorer explained what they liked about Second Life and what they see as potential opportunities for further photographic explorations.

SL-tivity 2 (week 2) "Virtual StoryCubes" adapts the StoryCubes methodology developed by Proboscis (2008). StoryCubes are a tactile thinking and storytelling tool for group work, used for exploring relationships and narratives (Figure 3). Each face of the cube can illustrate or describe an idea, a thing or an action; placed together it is possible to build up multiple narratives or explore the relationships between them in a novel three-dimensional way.

Figure 3: Building Virtual StoryCubes

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2479&g2_serialNumber=2

In Second Life, Virtual StoryCubes are not only simple to construct but add a new dimension to the end story because they are not affected by gravity as the paper-based cubes are in a physical classroom. Plus, the size

Figure 4: An example of a Second Life Subculture

and flexibility of the cubes are potentially unlimited in an IVW, enabling more complex and interactive stories to be told. Adding high quality images, in contrast to the hand drawn illustrations in real life, they are also straightforward and offer amazing end products.

Participants were asked to produce their own cube of digital images relating to the snapshots they had taken of subcultures/communities around Second Life (Figure 4 is an example); a new level of complexity was introduced with the uploading of images into Second Life (a feature that requires payment), in order to use them as textures for the Virtual StoryCubes. After the task was completed students were instructed to participate in a discussion and explain how they came to create their Virtual StoryCube photo-narrative and debate the different narratives generated by each photographer.

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2449&g2_serialNumber=2

In SL-tivity 3 (third and final week), entitled "Explorations," the aim was to further explore and debate the wider potential of 3-D IVWs for digital media and digital photography in relation to research into youth cultures and subcultures. In this task, the collaborative Virtual StoryCubes were further developed and adapted. To create the group narrative and to tell the avatars' stories about the Second Life communities, the individual cubes needed to be arranged together, and this required some negotiation and debating, regarding which snapshots to keep and which ones to hide (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Virtual StoryCube Story

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2500&g2_serialNumber=2

After the task was completed, collaborators debated the different narratives that were developed in the group's story. This further encouraged a critical discussion, and a reflection on issues related to training in Second Life, comparing and contrasting it to previous experiences of researching subcultures in real life. The debate included considering how certain image-making possibilities in Second Life, like zooming in without being noticed, or flying over to photograph, impact on photographic practice and ethical relationships to other Second Lifers.

The Findings

Focus Group

The focus group relied on the method of photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002), which consists of inserting the participants' Second Life screenshots into a thematically structured conversation. The images were organised into three groups: the images taken whilst doing fieldwork in Second Life, the images selected for the StoryCubes narratives, and finally, the images of the students in the Second Life teaching and learning environment, both individually and working together.

Culture, identity, and place

The images taken in Second Life reflect the pursuit of avatars that use spectacular fashion and differentiate themselves through their visual style (Figure 6). In parallel, they reveal an interest for distinct places, both as background for the avatars' poses or as spaces in their own right, locations that might represent the uniqueness of cultural practices in Second Life. These include clubs, shopping malls, and Second Life replicas of real life sites.

Figure 6: Spectacular subcultural styles

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2467&g2_serialNumber=2

A participant who photographed the Second Life Globe Theatre, a virtual reconstruction of the original London Globe (Figure 7), stated: "The existence of replicas like this in Second Life indicates that it is not only about fantasy world and there is a lot of copy of the real world. The site or property, the commercial aspect, could be a good entry point into Second Life."

Figure 7: Place as a cultural practice

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2461&g2_serialNumber=2

Participant-observation

The participants reported that just following people around and scouting for locations was a result of the short time frame they had to develop the brief. If this were a 12-week project, they would plan to spend more time in Second Life doing fieldwork, getting to identify the groups they would be working with, building relationships, and working towards a more complex form of representation, including interviews collected via the chat tool.

Different forms of participant-observation were suggested, along a continuum that included total immersion in Second Life culture. One of the participants suggested he would work with a distinctive group of Second Life entrepreneurs and live with them to document their cultural practices. "I would be interested in following someone who is really serious about Second Life, someone who spends a lot of time there, who has an occupation in Second Life and would follow him for days, photographing and interviewing, that would be my kind of approach. Doing more ethnographic work."

Self-representation as a group

Participants chose the images of the group above those of themselves individually in Second Life, as the most significant memory of their experience. Their favourite image was one in which the group visiting the Media Zoo Island looked at a large screen displaying a black and white photo (Figure 8). In it, a skeleton lays in an open grave in a Kalash village cemetery. They referred to the cognitive meta-levels embedded in the image: "What attracts me is the connection between us who don't appear real but the photo that appears very real … . what I like is the contrast between the fact that we knew we were in Second Life, and the photo represented real life; this was a striking contrast for me … .we are all avatars in a 3-D world looking at a picture in real life."

Figure 8: Self-representation as a group

http://www.msdm.org.uk/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=2434&g2_serialNumber=2

This is in tune with what they find as the most gratifying aspect of working in Second Life: the ability to collaborate on tasks such as the group StoryCube, which involves moving 3D objects around and agreeing on a collective narrative." The most gratifying aspect was that of working together as a group in Second Life. What surprised me was how it worked so well, negotiating how to place the cubes. In a way every disagreement whilst using chat could become very messy; that's why maybe everyone agreed to agree!"

Figure 9: Exploratory group work tasks

Participants prefer such situated tasks to repeating traditional classroom delivery in a virtual environment: "Fieldwork, group work … these are the best approaches for projects in Second Life. I thought was kind of weird to have a classroom environment in Second Life when we are in a classroom environment in a computer anyway. I'd rather be up with my feet in the air in Second Life. If you can do something different why not do it?" (Figure 9).

Interviews

Interviews with students revealed several areas where Second Life has a real potential for digital photography projects.

Visualisation

The students found that the visual aspect and graphic interface of Second Life is quite appealing and engaging for learning.

The visual aspect is really nice, walking about, flying about, and seeing all these things people have been creating, really colourful, it's just kind of interesting for the eyes. All the little gages you got, taking pictures, be able to teleport from one place to another is really nice.

The visual element was particularly important for engaging digital photography students because they are sensitive and responsive to visuals.

"We are photography students, we're all creative artists, visual people that are turned on by things that we see …. because we're all visual students, it definitely helped us."

Research into subcultures

The students think that Second Life can be an interesting place for researching into subcultures.

"I think Second Life could be very interesting in terms of research, to get research about youth culture… and I think it gives you some ideas for real life as well because it's about the same thing really, you can find the same thing as well, just easier…Also I think it wouldn't be as easy as taking pictures from so many different places in real life because you can just go to everywhere you like, and in real life you can't travel to China …. So you see different subcultures within a few minutes, then that's a bit difference."

Some think that Second Life promotes them to consider broader ethical issues when taking photos in Second Life

"[In real life] I have to speak to the real person, ask them to pose for me, while in Second Life I don't need to because if I took the photo from far away, they are unaware of this at all."

Virtual exhibition

The students like the idea that Second Life can be used as a virtual place to displaying their work. They think that it is cheaper and that the space is less constrained when running a virtual exhibition or gallery in Second Life than in real life.

"I think it will be quite different from the real life … you would have to think about where to put on, on the wall or on the space. In Second Life you don't need to worry … .you don't have to worry about the space."

Additionally, people from all over the world can potentially view their work.

"It's just a complete different way to advertise yourself …. If you were having an exhibition in London, you get real people from that area in London to see your pictures, [whereas in Second Life] you can invite people from all over Second Life to come from all over the world in real life to see your work. It's really good at networking as well as displaying and exhibiting."

Development of interactive objects

The students are fascinated by the potential of Second Life for building and developing objects. One of the students completely changed his view on Second Life after taking part in the StoryCube and telling a story about it. He reflects:

"The StoryCube thing is a very good experience for me. Before, the whole Second Life thing, I think we all had this idea of Second Life that it was very geeky; I don't know, really a weird world or whatever. That perspective has really changed for me."

The students are also fascinated by how easy and cheap it is to build things in Second Life.

"Well I didn't realize you could, that anybody could do it. I thought you'd probably need to get some sort of, it sounds weird, but building permit. Because I think you have to pay to build things if you're going to leave them in Second Life."

The development is easy, as well, because it doesn't require a high level of technicality such as scripting and coding as some students thought.

"It's quite easy and simple. I think you still need certain level of expertise to do that sort of thing …. I think once you've been shown the basis, you realize you don't actually do in 3D software, putting all the scary numbers or something. As long as you don't need to do that, it's a lot less daunting."

They find the group activity based on developing story cubes and storytelling fun and engaging. One of the students describes how easy the group discussion and negotiation can be done in Second Life.

"It was so easy to create the cubes and put pictures on it, and even negotiate how we're gonna do that. That was incredibly easy. And that really surprised me. So you can learn something definitely."

One of the key elements contributing to this engaging experience was that the group discussion was anchored by the development of an interactive object.

"This is interactive, involving you in what's going on, you know, it's not like lecturing something, it's quite easy just sit back, not really being able to pay that much attention, while that keeps you involved, because it amuses you …. It's really important to keep people interest, and definitely Second Life does that."

The fact that students were able to see how the story cubes were built in Second Life enhanced their overall experience.

"It sort of seems more real if you can see how it's done. I think it's quite a cool way to do things in terms of building stuff and seeing what you've made as well."

This experience also speeded up the whole process for group negotiation.

"I thought the fact that we could actually see the planned material as we would discuss it. So seeing it happen makes it a lot easier because otherwise I think, if you were doing something via MSN for example, if I'm planning something with a friend, you can plan it and when you do it, it takes ages; you'd have to send the file or describe it, which will take ages. But with Second Life you could see it straight in front of you, what is happening, so if you want to make a few changes you could do it there and then which made it easier, generally, be able to see it, see whether or not they agree with as it was going on."

Discussion and Future Considerations

The pilot study indicates that we can find in Second Life a "produsage" environment as described by Bruns (2008), characterised by the creative collaboration of its residents, one of the most visible outputs being their appearance and environments, a collective work of art that provides a prolific site to extend our previous work with photography and subcultures. In the words of one of the participants, this might lead us ultimately to ask: "Is every location in Second Life related to a specific subculture? Or are we taking Second Life as a subculture in itself? Or alternatively, is there anything as a mainstream culture in Second Life?"

As pointed by Robbins (2007), Second Life is a unique tool to create community, and if we provide student-centred materials, we can yield engagement, community bonding, and create a community of learners. This can be done through sharing enjoyable experiences (experimenting, collaborating, having fun), and exploring all of Second Life as a learning space.

To encourage curiosity towards difference, in a space where flexible identity facilitates identity experimentation, it might be of interest to further investigate issues related to perceptions of identities in Second Life. This can be done through experimenting with avatar names and changes of appearance over time, allowing for the students to try out different roles and characters. As a participant noted: "One can create one's scene, start a new tribe, and this can become a project in itself." This suggests that playful engagement with ethnographic modes that has been the hallmark of artistic practice (Morley, 2006) is possible and desirable in Second Life.

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