

Mobilizing User-Driven Innovation in and of Virtual Worlds

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Mobilizing User-Driven Innovation in and of Virtual Worlds

This paper concerns the notion of 'presence' and how it can contribute to our understanding of innovation in and of the virtual world *Second Life*. As coined by its creators the California based Linden Lab, Second Life is "a world imagined, built and created by its residents". The platform provides a set of tools and spaces where users can develop their own avatars, objects and surroundings and thus the entire content of Second Life is posed as user-driven and constructed by users. Users currently engaged in such activities amount to about 2 million people occupied with designing, coding, performing, working, managing, socializing and creating value in the local currency Linden dollars. Second Life has thus been characterized as a large-scale **user-driven innovation** experiment.

Besides this characteristic of 'user-driven', Second Life is also strongly coupled with a collective vision of **presence**, a sense of being there. To understand its key role, the paper provides a brief overview of this discourse of presence. Presence has for example been developed by a range of researchers to describe the very essence of experiences in virtual environments and it is also often deployed in user narratives about lives and actions in virtual worlds.

In order to explore possible intersections between user-driven innovation and the notion of presence, the paper presents a study of a Second Life media center, *Pop Art Lab* (PAL), opening September 2008 with the mission of 'exploring how to present and promote new music in 3D environments'. Since then PAL has developed into a virtual 'lab' comprising four listening booths for previewing newly released music recordings while socializing with other listeners, a central dance floor hosting parties and events, and a stage set where musicians are interviewed and conduct live music performances. Among others, PAL partners with the inworld television company, *Treet.tv*. that films and distributes these performances, and with *Amazon.com*, from which one can purchase the music from within the virtual listening booths.

PAL was founded by a devoted Second Lifer, Claus Uriza. It is driven and developed by a voluntary team of 10 people, and it thrives on the notion of presence as its visitors share listening spaces and concerts experiences with other visitors real time: the concept and design is built up around the idea that people are *there*, together. The PAL team has created this lab environment by collecting, buying and reassembling existing objects in Second Life, by constructing new objects with the available design tools, and by coding objects with movements, actions and capabilities with the internal Second Life programming language (Linden Scripting Language). Furthermore, PAL has been promoted and expanded through continual networking and marketing efforts.

In the proposed paper Pop Art Lab is scrutinized through (1) a historical account of its development, with selected examples of different ways in which content is created and how specific actors have contributed to or curbed innovations, and, (2) an analysis of a single concert event that serves to unpack the complex infrastructure of layered technologies and the extensive network of people in different ways preparing, coordinating, acting, tinkering with an array of technologies to make the event work. In this analysis, the notion of 'presence' is shifted from being an experience of the individual user to an intermediary both performed by this ecology of actors as well as contributing to it. The analysis presents an alternative understanding of presence as a collective frame of representation that allows designers and users to coordinate their actions. The conclusion pinpoints this collective vision, or **imaginaire** (Flicky 2007), as playing an important part in driving and mobilizing user-driven design in Second Life.