

Art and Spirituality on *Second Life*: A Participant Observation and Digital Quest for Meaning

Mary Stokrocki, Arizona State University (USA)

Abstract: *This participant observation study is a search for the holistic essence of the spiritual or inspirational in the artwork on Second Life, a digital metaverse. I focused on one island—Spirit Mountain. After, negative first impressions, I surveyed its offerings, tracked my wanderings, interviewed two of its artists, documented the evolution of one artist’s work and her inspiration, and attended one of the Immersive Events. Then I analyzed and compared these artists’ work in search for its holistic essence. In my digital quest, I learned about the repeated spiritual importance of the color blue, natural forms, water, and light. Deeper questioning revealed how SL is an artful place that can heal sadness and loss, achieve good—help suicide survivors, find stress release. Finally SL helps connect people and groups on international scope, whereby they become teachers.*

Keywords: Second Life, Holistic Education, Meaning, Art, Spirituality, Beauty, Water, and Light.

1. Introduction

Second Life (SL) is a virtual world or digital metaverse, entirely constructed by participants. After a year of wanderings and doing research here, I was in great need of spiritual inspiration, so I accepted the challenge of writing about this quest. I searched the terms "art and spirituality" on SL and came across eleven notices, and found the **Spiritual Art Group** with 390 members. The group proposed, "Art is a way to expand and to share beauty, love, light and wisdom." It also promoted peace and enlightenment, a search for meaning.

SL functions as holistic education in that it provides free online resources for developing natural health

knowledge, offers international networking of artists with similar interests, and inspires artworks beyond self-expression to cultivate mind body, and spirit. A holistic way of thinking seeks to encompass and integrate multiple layers of meaning and experience rather than defining human possibilities narrowly (Miller, 2009). Educators who adopt a holistic approach, in all disciplines, promote a sense of concern and caring for teachers' and students' relationships with each other, the community and the natural environment (Gallegos-Nava, 2001). These goals are based on the holistic philosophy that everything in the universe is interconnected to everything else (Miller, 1993). Furthermore, holistic art education connects learning and encourages reflection that stimulates human awareness, including emotional, physical, ecological, cognitive, aesthetic, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life. "Because alienation and personal fragmentation are thought to be two of the causes of many of the current national, global, ecological, and spiritual crises, a holistic approach is urgently needed" (Seymour, 2004). Such holistic education is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. Holistic education evokes an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning accomplished in different ways (Campbell, 2009).

London (2007) referred to holistic centers that promote expression of well-being and our high and deep encounters with life. SL similarly offers holistic resources for artists seeking a home, an office, a gallery, and/or sustaining a preserve for spiritual contemplation or inspiration. Thus, I choose to explore Art & Spirituality on SL.

2. Methodology

I decided to do a **participant observation** (PO) study of one location, **Spirit Mountain**. PO evolves in three stages: Data collection, content analysis, and comparative analysis (Stokrocki, 1997). I collected data by surveying its sites and offerings and interviewing some of its prominent artists,

using text, e-mail, and voice mail (Chen, Peter, & Hinton, S.M. (1999).

I also participated in some of their workshops, in trying to understand why this place appeals to them as a spiritual inspiration for artmaking and appreciating. I analyzed documents linked to the Spirit World Website (www.SpiritWorld.com) and the results of the interviews for recurring patterns of meaning, did a visual analysis of my many photographs taken on this site to find their essence, and consulted two meditating outside art educators as key informants. My initial study consisted of two summer months of daily explorations. Comparison with the outside literature is ongoing. Such qualitative research emphasizes understanding and explanation rather than rigor (Labuschagne, 2003). My major research and interview questions were what is Art? What is Spirituality? Show me one of your artworks and why you value it? Where do you find your inspiration?

3. Context, Survey of Places, Negative First Impressions

Spirit Mountain on SL is composed of a Welcome Center-Lounge (upstairs), Spiritual Art Gallery, Into This Moment Healing Center (educational), Indigo Room Radio Studio, and Atlantean Builders (public sandbox). Other places included Readers/Healers, Stitching Ex6, Reiki Place, Brahma Yoga Meditation Ashram (Kiirtan worship), ITM Healing, and Spirit Forest. At the Atlantis Shop on Airtol Hill, a visitor can purchase star-like Angel Sculptures (\$50L—Linden dollars) or buy a Relaxing Leaves Chair in natural green or multicolored, with a color changer and animation (for different meditation movements). The Healing Dove shop seemed relaxing. One can buy paintings, hanging fantasy lamp, healing circles, and an All Seeing Eye. I also spotted dispensing machines for such goods as Sun Tanning Oil. Inside Heart of Brightness Temple of the Buddha of Light and Freedom, I spied a bowling alley (Mirandirge 173, 159, 44)? You can buy sexy skins here too. What does these things have to do with spirituality? Unfortunately, this all

seemed like cosmic kitsch at first! My first impressions were not positive.

4. Spiritual Groups and Avatar Meetings

Then I overviewed the groups related to Art and Spirituality on SL and found only two. Later, I discovered the “**Spiritual Art Group**” with 394 members. Its charter said:

In our times, art is more important than ever. Art is a way to expand and share Beauty, Love, Light, and Wisdom. Art promotes Peace and Enlightenment. Art and Spirituality are always linked. Please participate in our debates and conferences and promote Art as a Spiritual Path. (Founder: Hermes Kondor).

Later, I learned about the good that members of the **Spiritual Art Group** do. I teleported to International Solidarity Center (Airtol Hill (5, 174, 46) and found quotes by Dalai Lama (Never Give Up!), Gandhi, and the Prayer of St. Frances of Assisi (Lord, Make me an instrument of your peace). UNICEF’S Declaration of the Rights of the Child, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Ex6 Foundation (pronounced excess), for example, helps suicidal people (with a Help Phone, an interactive website, forum and chat). The Spiritual Art Group publishes, a magazine, *The Healing Pool*, and solicits stories from SL friends. I left a note for the owner—Hermes Kondor that I would like to join and interview him. I teleported to his Spiritual Art Gallery and noticed his unusual artwork at the door. I later learned that Spirit Mountain is only two years old and still evolving.

I teleported to the **Spiritual Art Gallery** at the center of Spirit Mountain. At the entrance, an angel sculpture greeted me and inside there were over 30 large paintings. Paintings consisted of *The Traveler Series* (metaphysical), *Elemental Angels* (e. g, Fire), and *Lovers Series* by Hermes Kondor. In the rear conference room, I met Cre8tivefemme Chemistry, who was working on an installation sculpture. She showed me her sculpture and invited me to her workshops. I thus interviewed these two avatars for this study.

5. Interviews

Hermes Kondor is the group leader of the Spiritual Art Gallery and he called himself a Spiritual Knight. During our interview, Hermes told me that he lives in Portugal and is a photojournalist in Real Life (RL). He calls himself a Spiritual Knight because he is fond of the Knights Templar (joking). He became involved in SL when he went to a conference in Lisbon and heard the speaker talk about the possibilities of SL. He had to purchase a new computer to do the things that he wanted to on SL, like exhibit his work here. People buy his works but he mostly likes to share them.

On another occasion, I found him in the Spiritual Galley. He later informed me that he made these colored photos in RL by taking pictures of sculptural crystals with angels inside made by a friend. This exhibition is called “The Traveler Series” and he is fond of the painting at the entrance because “light” was the major ingredient. He talked about the meaning of spiritual as “different dimensions and we touch others at times. These dimensions overlap.” He told me that Indigo blue is a spiritual color (Carroll & Tober, 1999).

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Figure __ Traveler 12

We walked to the back of the gallery where he put up a screen for his slide show beginning with his “Elemental Angel Series” that represents the elements of fire, air, earth, and water.

Then he invited me to Voice Chat in RL with our built in computer microphones. This was my first time to do a RL conversation in SL. He showed his black and white water series. He explained how he captures the flow of fountain water at 4000m a second. See Waterdrops Figure__. He explained, “This reality, you can only see with a camera.” He speculated that his attraction to water might be because he was born on the verge of Pisces and Aquarius. He explained “This is a challenge of the act of seeing . . . It shows the importance of the light as the raw material of the photographer.”



He rents four galleries in SL. Here in Spiritual Art Gallery are his uploaded RL photos. He owns another gallery for his Black and White Work, and a third gallery is his work studio at Paris Art (Reseau Art'ichoo, 193, 235, 24). Here I saw his black and white "Abstractions" sculptures and Water photographs. For example, one postcard featured oval forms that overlapped each other in a cycle, in the middle was his RL *Water_02* Photograph, and to the right is his perpetual twisting, Sculpture No12, zebra glass, that I purchased. He also has a fashion photo studio (Kondor Art Gallery, Couture BOSL--The Best of SL Boulevard, 152, 212, 26).

A week later I received the group announcement about his opening at Alba's Art Gallery (175, 31, 55) at 1pm on Sunday, June 14 at GMT. The first floor was a collection of RL Black & White photography, and, at the base floor, a large collection of "Abstractions." He exhibited these works for the first time in SL, and some of them were made especially for the occasion. These organic and kinetic

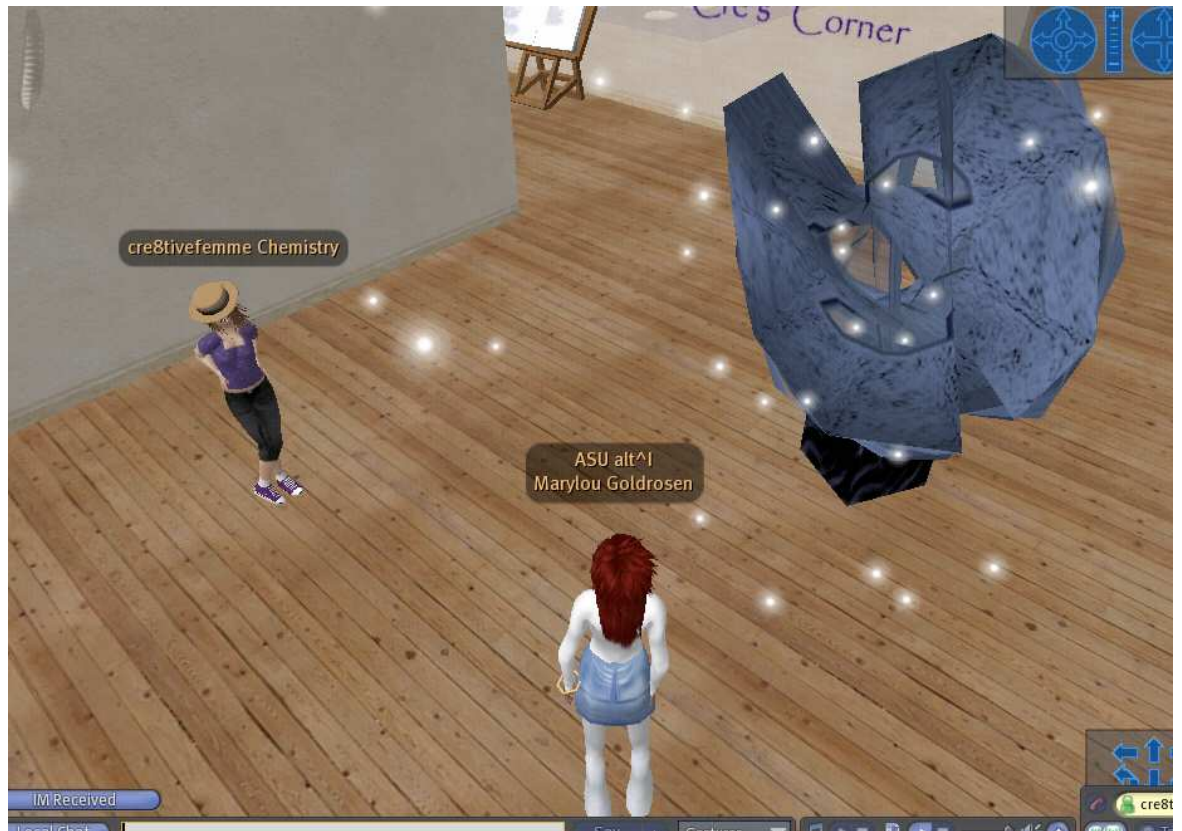
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sculptural forms twirled in space. I purchased his *Perceptual Motion* piece that reminded me of smoke. Then I was knocked off SL so that ended my experience that day.

Hermes confessed that he isn't proficient at marketing his works. In RL, Hermes is a Reiki master. He felt that he is "not a master photographer yet because he is always learning... the master looks into another universe." He also teaches photography by giving students professional jobs to do. Then I asked him about the meaning of his SL name choice. He said that Hermes is a messenger "above and beyond" and that Kondor means "freedom." He translated the term spiritual to mean "Love, and I am a lover not a fighter. I love life the most."

When I first met **Cre8tivefemme** on SL, I inquired about her name—chemistry. She speculated, "I would have just used Cree... but you needed a last name. I liked what it evolved into cre8tivefemme." In checking her profile, I learned that she lives by Lake Simcoe near downtown Toronto, Canada. She elaborated by e-mail, "A very quiet place, even quieter since her life partner died 3 years ago in September." She was a community educator and organizer most of her professional life. Through such arts as photography, stained glass, jewelry and clay mask making, art has helped her recover. In addition, SL has been a place for her to find her voice again in an artistic manner. She explained, "The simple joy of taking prim [basic shapes], texture and perhaps a script and creating something are like magic... a way healing."

The next week, I returned to the Galley and there I spied one of her fascinating sculptures with sparks flying from it (June 27, 2009, 1:00-2:00).



I wanted to hear more about this piece, so I interviewed her. Cree replied, “This [sculpture] *Midnight Desire* has a soft spot for me.” I asked her, how she made it. Here is part of the transcript:

[2009/06/27 13:30] cre8tivefemme Chemistry [typed] “SMILES.”

[2009/06/27 13:32] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: I learned to link (parts) last august and spent a lot of time in sandbox futzing [Yiddish term] to see what i could do with one and the picture being clearer inside is the remembering . . . no longer visceral, but inside [my head].

[2009/06/27 13:32] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: I liked the shape . . . the way it moved. A surprise. And it just felt right when it was done

[2009/06/27 13:33] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: that is one prim. The other prim is the particles, as I had no idea how to make them

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[2009/06/27 13:33] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: I have worked with clay in RL . . . not professionally. But it does make me happy

[2009/06/27 13:36] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: this purple one here

[2009/06/27 13:36] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: if you move in on it it changes from the simple form

[2009/06/27 13:36] cre8tivefemme Chemistry: I liked the imagery . . . [It] was how I was feeling at the time.

Then I inquired, "Why the color blue?" Cree, reminisced, "Hmm blue ... I was blue, pure love has a blue scent to it ... blue is soothing ... just felt blue." Later, she added, "White means a few things, it's joy in one culture and the colour of death or grieving in another."

Later, I e-mailed her the interview and she added, "I was in a place of mourning ... of remembering my love . . . and felt this happen." She explained, "I liked the shape-- the way it moved. A surprise. And it just felt right when it was done." Later she said, "That is one prim (the form) . . . the other prim is the particles as I had no idea how to make them."

She told me how she makes these pieces in the public SL sandbox in front of the Gallery, where she starts with one prim (basic shape) and attaches others." I asked her about how she created this special effect—"Looks like white lights emanating from the sculpture?" She clarified, "[This is called] poofing (purchased animation script to make moving lights) . . . beautiful . . . and the memory is pleasing." She elaborated, "I liked the shape -- the way it moves. A surprise. And it just felt right when it was done. If you move in on it, it changes its simple form."

She explained further, "You make a prim. Set texture to blank. Put script in prim. Add first picture to prim, a cube is best and you can reset the size. You must reset the script every time you add a picture." Then she surprisingly sent me a copy of the sculpture.

I met her again at another event and. I asked, "How is your art spiritual?" She answered, "It feeds your mind and creative soul. I often work from the inside out. I'd consider it spiritual; then again I think all voices expressed in art are spiritual. "What is art-sculpture to you?" I asked. She responded. "A voice. ... My mind/ spirit requires it.

The following week, I noticed that Cree was online and asked to meet her. She teleported me to Chakryn Forest, her inspirational place. She said, "This is one of my favorite spots to think and work on an art program or take pictures."

She revealed, "I find education and this new technological age amazing. I'm so glad to see teachers finding new ways to use it. Sorta, meeting them where they are. It also has such potential to address the different ways that people learn."

This amazing forest featured an array of green trees and rushing water. Here Cree sat on a rock in a tan dress sprouting peacock feather wings. She told me that her uncle had a peacock farm. A peacock feather is a sign of great beauty. We listened to the rushing water and I could see why the color "blue" inspired her. Cree clarified, "I was thinking about the spiritual side of art. I often create after i meditate. There is this place i go to where the creation just flows." Then she took me to visit her favorite meditation site—a serene Japanese Fishing Village (Gwampa Tropics). When I arrived, she was meditating on a cushion on a float in the middle of the water. I sat down and immediately began to meditate (the "sit" command, immediately started the meditation animation). She told me to adjust my sound and the meditation sound began, "Water is clean and clear-- like our journey through this world. See the light dance on the water, before it dances in you. Breathe.... now drink and taste the sweet waters..." (7/7/09). After Cree left, I felt more relaxed to stay and pray.

At another time, I received this Group Invitation to a Piano Concert at the Spiritual Art Gallery, "These workshops are to feed your mind and creative soul. I have been lucky to meet many creative people who have inspired and taught me along my travels in SL. I am pleased to announce the first in our series of Immersive Arts Workshops" (cre8tivefemme Chemistry; Wednesday, 17 Jun 2009 16:08:34 GMT). While the pianist performs the artist will make sculptures in concert -- at the same time in the public sandbox. Later, Cree e-mailed me, "I've heard there is now scientific research that suggests there is much holistic inspiration in music. I've always orchastrated (sic) my life (and now art) with music." These workshops inspire the soul to create, as a musician performs. If we can't find this inspiration in RL, perhaps SL

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can offer it for people patient enough to listen.

In summary, these artists presented their work in transformation. London (2007) asked art educators what they lose by failing to address the spiritual dimension in their work and teaching. Gablik (1988) also stated that the artist who is "... able to bring art back in touch with its sacred sources; through his [her] own personal transformation . . . develops not only new forms of art, but new forms of living (p. 126). SL can offer this new "connected aesthetics" with purpose of promoting the common good, See Figure ___



Figure __. InterSolidarity on Spiritual Mountain, run by Hermes Kondor, connects spiritual arts to greater causes.

6. Conclusions

My first impression of Spirit Mountain was disappointing in meeting no avatars. The place seemed to be inundated with buying and selling as evidenced in the many shops for purchasing spiritual products for commercial profit making. RL economy also demands such practice. This paradox exists in the art world too. Art is not “pure” spirit but perhaps the pursuit of it.

Participant observation research on SL, however, revealed evidence of holistic education—new paths for art and spiritual issues. Interviewing these two friendly artists/avatars changed my opinions and captured the richness of the creative experience in their own terms. The wealth of ideas from these interviews enriched my soul, as they became my teacher as well. In this case, I learned the importance of the color blue, natural forms, water, and light in this place. Research shows that blue is a favorite color of many people, represents spiritualism, and is often associated with water and sky. In art education, Smith Siegel (2008) wrote about spiritual color, “Achieving higher planes of introspective understanding, appreciation, and personal connection enables our work to rise to a more sophisticated communication level.” Furthermore, beyond its worldwide importance for sustaining life and endangered state, water too has its history of healing properties (Ellyard, 2007). Then to, without light, there would be no life and no art. Wrote, All this adds up to a major challenge for us . . . as arts educators . . . to express human emotion, to shed light on the soul, and the spirit, and to begin to search for artistic and cultural truth” (Tupman, 2009).

Deeper questioning revealed how Spiritual Mountain on SL is an artful place and can heal sadness and loss, help suicide survivors, find stress release or a restful place, and connect with people from different countries as this experience has shown, whereby participants teach each other. Gradle (2007) argued for “A participatory mode of art making, in which the meaning in an art form is constructed from interaction and no longer resides solely in the artist or the viewer or even in the piece itself, involves a paradigmatic shift to viewing creativity as actions that sustain and renew the spirit through connections” (p. 1509). Thus, holistic

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education also can be conceived as spiritual pursuit and connection sustained by a different form of participatory cyber learning—the metaverse of *Second Life*.

Postscript: One of the dominant words repeated was 'light.' I noted a paradox of heavy forms and capturing light. The word "avatar" means the incarnation of the divine, and Second Life is a place with our spirits can run somewhat free. My name is Marylou in RL and Mary Lou Goldrosen in SL a version of Lucy or *lux*—light.

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