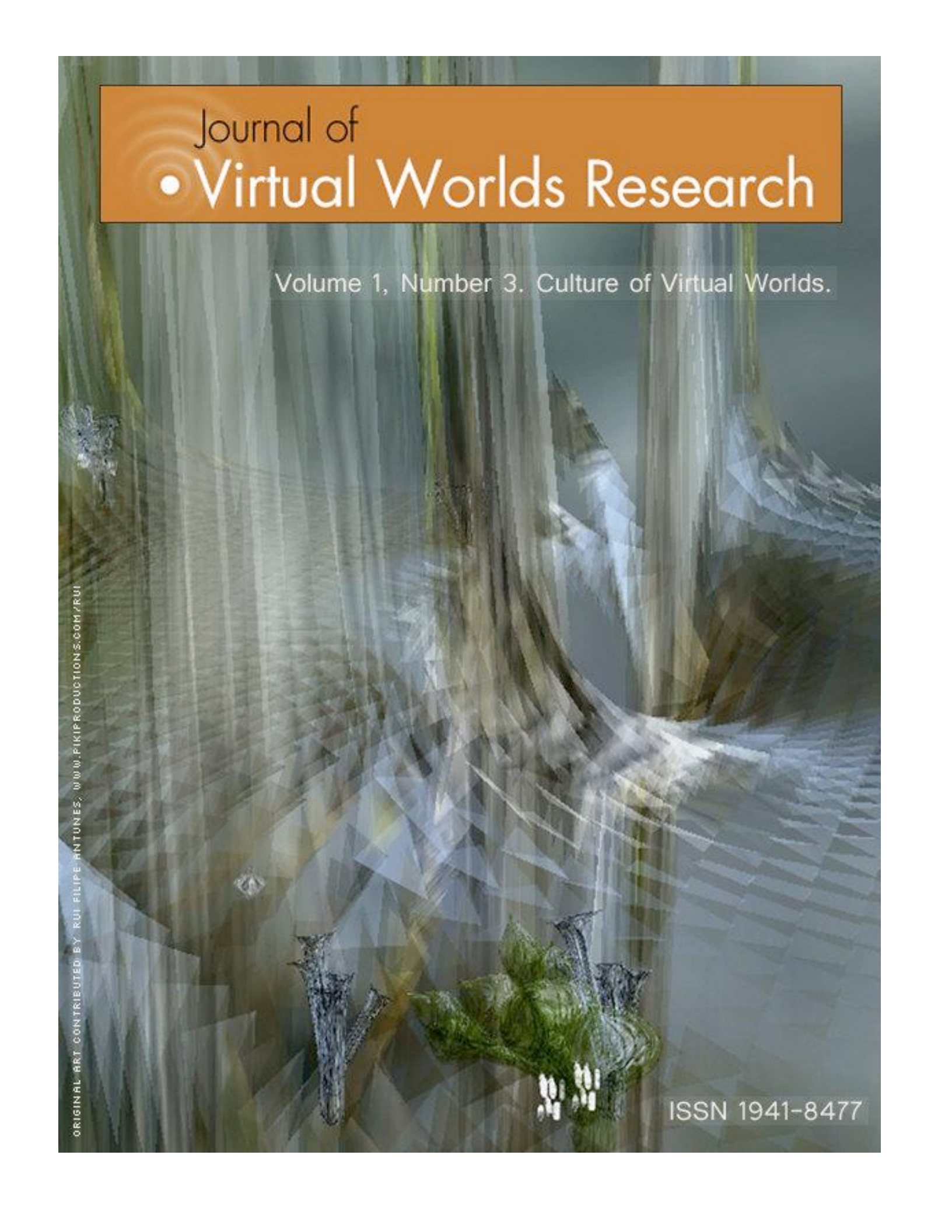




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Artistic Expression in Second Life:

What can we learn from creative pioneers of new mediums?

By John Lester/Pathfinder Linden, Linden Lab

This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"In thinking about the spaces of virtual worlds, and the practices we witness within them, how can we define what counts as culture? Can we see any common cultural trends emerging in different virtual worlds, or are practices as disparate as the worlds and groups we find within them?"

Abstract

Second Life is a virtual world that allows its residents to create completely original content using atomistic building tools in a shared and globally accessible space. In this respect it is a very unique new medium for artistic expression, as it give artists not only a new collection of creative tools, but also the ability to create an environment where individuals can experience this art as a group while engaging with each other. How are artists exploring this new medium of virtual worlds and what can we all learn from them? In some ways, they are leveraging very ancient human desires for shared experiences around classic creative work such as music and visual art. In other ways, they may be creating completely new models of artistic expression, such as dynamic art that changes based on the interactions of both live performing artists and patrons in a global setting that sometimes blurs the boundaries between the virtual world and the physical world. Studying these new artistic explorations may yield insights into yet unforeseen best practices for engaging human beings around creative content and collaborative expression in virtual worlds.

Keywords: Second Life; art; expression; virtual worlds.

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Artistic Expression in Second Life:

What can we learn from creative pioneers of new mediums?

By John Lester/Pathfinder Linden, Linden Lab

A great deal of artistic expression in Second Life is at once familiar. Many of the scenarios are instantly recognizable, such as live music performances in clubs, galleries of 2D paintings hanging on walls, and sculpture gardens. When presented with new mediums, human beings tend to first replicate what is already known. It is not surprising that the first photographs closely resembled classic portraits and paintings of nature or that the first movies were little more than plays on a stage filmed with a single motion picture camera. But artists always push the boundaries of new technologies into new areas of expression. Experimenting with different lenses and exposures allowed photographers to capture still images that went beyond what had been seen in paintings of our natural world. The language of cinema evolved over decades as directors explored new ways to tell stories in film far beyond the single vantage point of someone sitting in front of a stage.

As a medium, Second Life is very successful in allowing artists to replicate preexisting models. However, it allows a much broader scope of experience due to its nature as a space that allows people from around the world to meet simultaneously in a common virtual place. At live music performances in Second Life (http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Live_Performance_Home), artists typically stream in a live audio feed of their performance to an audience that is experiencing the event in real time. Everyone in the audience is "there," yet they are physically dispersed across the world. Conversations between members of the audience are commonplace, but due to the global nature of the audience, these conversations are inherently cross-cultural. This is a new phenomenon happening in the context of a very ancient experience – listening to music in a group.

Some artists are exploring Second Life as a medium that allows them to create work that goes beyond what they are currently creating in real life. An excellent example of this is Bryn Oh, a Second Life "Ghost Artist" for a successful Toronto oil painter. (<http://brynoh.blogspot.com>). Bryn sees Second Life not as a space to bring 2D copies of her real life paintings, but rather as a space to create interactive and exploratory experiences that allow patrons to step into her visions and creative stories. The group blog "Not Possible in Real life" (<http://npirl.blogspot.com>) acts as a hub to highlight artistic content that is simply not possible to create in real life. The range of content they cover includes architecture, landscaping, and even fashion.

Pushing the boundaries a bit further, we see artists in Second Life replicating other models such as live performances involving choreography with live actors, music, and dancers but creating experiences impossible in the physical world. Sets are designed that leverage the scripting language in Second Life, creating environments that change dramatically based on the actions of both the live performers and the audience. An example of this type of innovation is the continuing work of Second Life artist DanCoyote Antonelli and the ZeroG SkyDancers (<http://sl.nmc.org/2008/01/07/zerog-second-spring/>). DanCoyote's most recent performance in *Second Life* involved a vertical stage over three kilometers high (in relation to the size of the avatars), which lifts the audience as the dancers fly around a set that changes its structure based on their motions. The culmination of the performance allows the audience to actually fly with the dancers.

Finally, artists are exploring ways to create artistic experiences that bridge the virtual and physical world. "Brooklyn is Watching" (<http://brooklyniswatching.com>) is a hybrid of Second Life and Real Life art, involving a Real Life gallery in Brooklyn NY where gallery visitors can see and interact with exhibits in Second Life. CounterpART gallery (<http://jeffreylipskyarts.com/filthyflunos.aspx>) exists in Lowell, MA, serving as an extension of Real Life artist Jeffrey Lipsky's artistic presence in Second Life (where he is known as Filthy Fluno) that involves mixed reality mashups of not only art but also live music.

All of these examples of artistic innovation in Second Life are significant because of their basic artistic merits. But they are perhaps even more significant in the way they illustrate how artists themselves are exploring the potential of virtual worlds like Second Life. Artists fundamentally seek to engage people and expose them to new ideas, while guiding them to see the world and themselves in a new light. In Second Life, we clearly see how artists are leveraging preexisting mediums of expression and building on their familiarity, while pushing audiences and patrons to explore new ways of interacting with content and each other in a shared space.

This cultural trend should be of particular interest to academics studying the nature of virtual worlds. Since artists are by nature pushing the boundaries of new mediums and technology, they are eminently poised to make new discoveries in how virtual worlds can best be used to deeply engage human beings. What best practices can we learn from such artists? How can we leverage these practices to better use virtual worlds for education, immersive learning, and the sharing of culture in a global community? By combining something old and something new, artists are giving us a glimpse of the possibilities.