PLACE-MAKING IN ONLINE VIRTUAL ENVIONMENT
The Case of Second Life

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1. INTRODUCTION

With Internet bandwidth becoming better and more affordable, coupled with rapid advancement in web technology, multiuser online 3D virtual environments have become a reality and increasingly popular. One such world, Second Life (launched in 2003), has 2.3 million "residents" living in their virtual platform as of January 2007. The residents "live", work and play there. They also socialize in public spaces inside this virtual environment.

Successful public spaces are those that have a sense of place. A place is different from a space. A place is a space with experiences based on its physical setting and type of activities carried out (Relph, 1986). Much has been written about place-making in the physical world, however, little has been written about user behaviour and what makes a sense of place in virtual environment such as Second Life (SL). As architects, we know how to design good public places in the real world but how do we do that in the virtual world? What are the criteria for a good virtual public place?

To answer these questions, the method of study is as follows. We reviewed literature in place-making for real worlds and virtual worlds (Canter 1977; Relph 1986, 2007; Whyte 1980; Kalay and Marx 2001, 2003; Champion and Bharat 2002). We then carried out ethnographic observations at four locations of public space in SL focusing on physical settings, activities and experience. During virtual world observations, screen shots were captured, notes were taken, and text log saved. In-world avatars were also interviewed. Kalay and Marx (2001 and 2003) had postulated a set of criteria for Cyber-Placemaking.

This was proposed before the birth of popular virtual worlds such as Second Life and thus not supported with empirical data. We find it to be a good starting point to use these criteria to analyze the SL case studies and verify which of the criteria is relevant. Our analysis also surfaced new criteria and we conclude with expanded criteria to create virtual place. This paper will contribute to how to do design a place rather than mere space in 3D multiuser online virtual world.

2. SECOND LIFE (SL) CASE STUDIES

The criteria for the selection of case studies in SL were based on several factors: the popularity of the location, the spatial layout, the events and activities present. Two Singaporean locations, Moonwater and Watersoul, were chosen due to the familiarity with the context and culture. The final SL locations selected are Moonwater Isle, Kaki Island (77, 30, 35); Watersoul Lounge, Kaki Island; Bear Dream Lodge Infohub (27, 128, 111) and Shiki Centre (100, 97, 38).

3. CRITERIA FOR PLACE-MAKING IN INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL WORLD

In Kalay and Marx's paper "Designing Places in Cyberspace" (2001) they proposed eight criteria for "Cyber-Placemaking": Events, Presence, Relative Locations, Authenticity, Adaptability, Variety of Experiences, Transitions and Memorable.

From our observations of the SL case studies, we offered sub-criteria to Kalay and Marx's criteria and also identified an additional four criteria: Context, Gestures, Improvisation and Graphic Representation.

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