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Considering Skawennati's Celestial Trees

Sculpture Between the Virtual and the Physical

Abstract

Skawennati tackles themes of futurity, history, and change as both an urban Kanien'kehá:ha woman and a cyberpunk avatar in her multimedia art. She is well known for her work in virtual environments and as co-founder of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), though her practice moves fluidly across the digital and physical divide.

This paper examines a collection of Skawennati's Celestial Tree sculptures—both virtual and physical—and explores how these works challenge traditional understanding of sculptural materiality and accessibility. Lead by Skawennati's avatar "xox," I traveled to AbTeC Island and beyond, engaging with these sculptures and the worlds in which they are installed. Considering art that has been created to be experienced exclusively in the virtual prompted conversations on embodiment and imaginative experience, further nuanced by Skawennati's practice of simultaneously creating in the physical realm. Furthermore, building within an immersive social virtual world introduces possibilities for community and viewer engagement unique to the post-digital period.

The membrane between the virtual and the physical is permeable, a truth that is overt when engaging with Skawennati's work. The artist tackles themes of futurity, history, and change as both an urban Kanien'kehá:ka woman and cyberpunk artist in her multimedia art. Born in Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, Skawennati belongs to the Turtle clan and holds a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal, where she resides. Considered a forerunner in the field of new media arts, she is best known for the works she has created in virtual environments. However, her practice moves fluidly back and forth between the virtual and the physical, calling into question the relationship between materiality and sculpture.

For the purposes of this essay, Skawennati and I decided to take a closer look at several of her *Celestial Trees*. These works have had various iterations, appear in a number of the

artist's films, and have been installed in both virtual and physical exhibition spaces, displaying Skawennati's nuanced and complex use of digital materiality. Her work challenges notions of accessibility in digital environments and prompts a consideration of how the sculptural operates within the context of public art—both virtually and physically. By visiting the environments where these pieces are installed, I was confronted with the inherently participatory nature of digital art, as well as the sense of embodiment that is characteristic of so much of Skawennati's sculptural work.

Visiting AbTeC Island

I sign into my long-neglected Second Life account (in truth used solely for research purposes) and I see that my last visited coordinates have already populated the navigation bar. It is rare that I go anywhere other than AbTeC Island in this virtual world, so I press enter and hope for the best. Familiar gallery walls load around me. I'm here! But I can't move and I have no idea why. I see "xox," Skawennati's avatar, walking toward me. I struggle to walk backward, forward, jump up, fly—anything. No luck. My avatar looks like she's panicking. Or maybe it's just me panicking. It takes me a while to understand what's going on. I soon realize that I'm stuck *in* a wall. We both calm down and I direct my avatar to jump up, over and over again, until we're free. I'm off to a rocky start.

An avatar is a representative of the self in the virtual realm. This could be the stock character you choose to play in a video game, or the profile picture you use for your messaging application, or the preloaded emoji in your phone that you've personalized to look like you. In the case of Second Life, your avatar is a highly customizable (and usually humanoid) body that you use to navigate within the world. Not only does your avatar allow you to appear as you would like to be seen, it also performs the physical and emotional actions you direct it to. Xox is Skawennati in the virtual world. Her virtual body as she has constructed it, wearing a little black tutu and big clunky boots, is ultimately an extension of herself. Over time, xox has developed tangentially from Skawennati, growing into a separate character of sorts. Skawennati refers to her avatar interchangeably as "her" and as "I."[1] Xox, and the relationship Skawennati has with her, is present in much of the artist's work (fig. 1).

It's been a little under one year since I've last visited the island, longer still since I've updated the physical appearance or wardrobe of my avatar. She's still wearing the same outfit I dressed her in years ago. I spent hours combing through the free clothing available in the Second Life store, choosing a "Rocker Chick" skirt and a black leather jacket. I had also struggled to alter her physical appearance. Though I opted to customize her body to look like mine, I added a few enhancements; I changed, for instance, the color of her hair with a single click.

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1   Sasha Sobrino, "Virtuosity and Virtuality: A Conversation with Skawennati," *Studio* 16, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2021): 52.

1   Skawennati, *Dancing With Myself*, 2015. Diptych: machinimagraph and photograph.

"We're going to need to do something about your feet," says xox. My feet? I zoom out so I can get a full look at myself. My feet are sticking out from underneath the black combat boots I'm wearing. It looks as though I'm wearing them as some sort of ankle bracelets. "It happens all the time with new people," she comments. I am not familiar with digital environments and, unbeknownst to me, I had been loudly announcing that fact to everyone around me. How embarrassing. I'm reminded of my first few journeys into Second Life in 2014 when I was initially learning how to move around in the world. I had been an obvious

newcomer and I had received numerous mocking messages from people walking by. As Karyne Levy has described it, Second Life had entered a postapocalyptic, or postutopian, state by then, with the world seemingly reserved for an elite group of true inhabitants.[2] Years had passed and I was still a newbie. I make a mental note of xox's comment and decided to worry about "fixing my feet" later. We set off to look at a number of the sculptures installed on the island—specifically two of Skawennati's *Celestial Trees*.

AbTeC Island is the name of the space in Second Life owned and operated by Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), an Indigenously determined research-creation network co-founded and codirected by Skawennati and her partner, Jason Edward Lewis. Its mission is to encourage Indigenous presence in the web pages, online environments, video games, and virtual worlds that comprise cyberspace. One of their biggest projects is the *Skins Workshops* in Indigenous storytelling and digital media, through which they teach Indigenous Youth how to become producers, not just consumers, of digital media.[3] AbTeC Island, their headquarters in cyberspace, was established as a location where aspects of these workshops could take place, as well as a persistent site where Skawennati could build and film her machinimas.[4] Over the fourteen years of its existence, it has evolved to become a community hub of creation and engagement. It now includes two galleries, numerous sets from Skawennati's machinimas, and many nooks and crannies for visitors to explore. AbTeC also hosts the weekly *Activating AbTeC Island*, a scheduled time where members of the AbTeC team are inworld to greet the public as tour guides, educators, or simply as someone to hang with in Second Life.[5]

Second Life is above all else a social virtual world. Though the online platform is often classified as a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), there is nothing fundamentally game-like about it. There is no such thing as winning or losing. There are no levels to achieve, no bosses to beat, and no objectives to meet. One simply exists and makes of their second life what they wish—even being social is not a requirement. Activities in Second Life include, but are not limited to: customizing your avatar, building three-dimensional items with their in-world tools, shopping, attending concerts and exhibitions, visiting people, exploring hundreds of different environments, and having cybersex. This

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2   Karyne Levy, "Second Life Has Devolved Into A Post-Apocalyptic Virtual World, And The Weirdest Thing Is How Many People Still Use It," *Business Insider*, August 1, 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/second-life-today-2014-7?op=1 (accessed October 21, 2022).

3   AbTeC has run the Skins Workshops since 2006, sharing their unique curriculum, expertise, and experience with Indigenous youth on reserves and in urban centers. See https://indigenousfutures.net/workshops/ (accessed October 21, 2022).

4   Machinimas are films shot in virtual environments (machine + cinema). Machinimagraphs are images captured in virtual environments (machine + photograph).

5   Presently, members of the AbTeC team greet the general public every Wednesday from 1 : 30–3 : 30 p.m. EST. Visitors need a Second Life account. See https://indigenousfutures.net/other/activating-abtec-island/ (accessed October 21, 2022).

connection to what Helen Kennedy refers to as "offline contexts"[6] is what sets Second Life apart from other MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* or *Minecraft*.[7] While these fantastical open-world online games offer a certain degree of social interaction for their players, achievements and objectives remain fundamental to gameplay. They do not connect as directly to the actual world as Second Life.

Second Life does not fit the definition of a MMORPG in other crucial ways. It matches all six of Betsy Book's characteristics of a "social virtual world."[8] Some are obvious, such as that of shared space and the immediacy of a resident's actions. Most interesting is the quality of *persistence* as defined by Book, which references the world's ongoing existence regardless of whether individual users are logged in or not. This is a stark contrast to most virtual games, where the environment's existence is dependent on the presence of the gamer. Second Life exists whether the user is present or not. As is the case with the physical world, it never turns off.

When Second Life was launched in 2003 by Linden Research, Inc., there was one key element that differentiated it from other online platforms: users had the ability to construct and modify absolutely everything in the environment. In addition, Linden also permits users to own the intellectual property rights to anything they create. Using the tools that the Second Life platform provided, Skawennati could build the sets and characters for the stories she wanted to tell. She had found the medium that she had been seeking. Her movies made in virtual environments are known as machinimas.

It took some time for Skawennati to realize that AbTeC needed their own island. One of the challenges of creating in Second Life is directly connected to its unique persistence. When Skawennati and her team first learned how to build in the environment, they would do so in "sandboxes"—designated areas sprinkled around the virtual world (called the "grid") where people have full permission to build. When they would log out for the day, what they had built had to be either dismantled and packed up, or run the risk of being moved or deleted by another user (called a "resident").

To make matters more complicated, the sandboxes themselves were frequently moved or deleted. Often Skawennati and her team would return to the coordinates of a sandbox they had been using and find it disappeared. They would spend a significant part of their days searching for a new one to inhabit, and then even more time rebuilding. It was an impractical and frustrating way to work, an example of the difficulties and intrinsic limitations of working with a game engine as a medium.

So AbTeC purchased their own island in Second Life, in the educational institutional neighborhood of the grid. The irony of Indigenous folks using real money to purchase

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6   Helen Kennedy, "Technobiography: Researching Lives, Online and Off," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 120–39.

7   *Minecraft* surpassed 140 million active players in 2021 and *World of Warcraft* follows with just under 5 million subscribers.

8   Betsy Book, "Moving Beyond the Game: Social Virtual Worlds," *State of Play* 2, nos. 1–13 (2004).

virtual land is not lost on Skawennati.[9] While beginning to build in the virtual environment represented new possibilities for Skawennati's artistic practice and a shifting understanding of the sculptural in the context of the digital, it also sparked conversations on digital rights and ownership in relation to creating within a virtual territory.

Digital Materiality: The First Celestial Tree

Xox and I walk out to the central plaza. This is where people usually show up when they use the up-to-date coordinates for AbTeC Island. I see the *Celestial Tree*, which is the point, as it has been placed in this prominent spot on the island so that it greets all visitors. Lofty and towering, with a twisted trunk, the tree is massive. Brightly colored and illuminated blossoms are scattered throughout its long branches, and the whole thing glows with an iridescent light, an otherworldly quality (fig. 2).

One of the most significant sculptural installations on AbTeC Island, it is the same tree created for the machinima *She Falls for Ages* (2017) and the virtual installation *A Slice of Skyworld* (2021). Here on the island, it serves as a center for activity in the environment, perhaps a meeting place or a space to commune, as suggested by the benches that surround it.

Prior to the construction of this sculpture in the virtual, Skawennati sculpted a three-dimensional sketch of it out of Playdoh in the physical world. While Second Life often functions as a sketchbook and a staging area for the artist, many examples of the reverse can be found in her practice. Skawennati's practice flows freely back and forth between the two worlds, with single works often being created simultaneously in both.

At the dawn of the digital revolution in art, Timothy Binkley argued that when working with traditional materials, the long process of creation leaves little room to explore alternate ideas. The artist working in virtual environments, though, can have it all. With this limitless potential, the creative powers are enhanced, and the realization of a work can keep pace with an artist's imagination.[10] Theorists writing at this time saw the utopian qualities of the virtual in art and imagined the complete freedom that could come with these new materials.[11] To them, the virtual represented above all a release from the restraints of the physical.

However, physical materiality and traditional sculptural practices remain intertwined. Sculpture continues to be largely accepted and understood as consisting of three-dimensional, tactile objects. Though the understanding of the sculptural has expanded to encom-

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9   Elizabeth LaPensée and Jason Edward Lewis, "Call it a Vision Quest: Machinima in a First Nations Context," in *Understanding Machinima: Essays on Filmmaking in Virtual Worlds* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 187–206.

10 Timothy Binkley, "The Quickening of Galatea: Virtual Creation without Tools or Media," *Art Journal,* 49, no. 3 (1990): 236.

11 See Binkley (1990); Suzanne M. Marchese and Francis T. Marchese, "Digital Media and Ephemeralness: Art, Artist, and Viewer," *Leonardo* 28, no. 5 (1995): 433–35; Anna Ursyn, "Planks, Programs and Art: Computer Graphics as a Sculptural Tool," *Leonardo* 26, no. 1 (1993): 29–32, doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/1575776.

2   Activating AbTeC Island,
2018.

pass found objects and machine-built objects (3D-printing is an example of this), and contemporary artists are increasingly challenging the canonical tradition, physical materiality remains foundational. Is Skawennati sculpting when she creates work shown exclusively in the virtual world? If this is not sculpture, then what is it? If an object is built using a computer program rather than a tangible material, is it no longer a sculpture?

The notion that the virtual is an inherently immaterial space has itself been challenged. Johanna Drucker has argued that a binary has been falsely imposed on recent debates theorizing materiality as it relates to the digital, suggesting that the physical *matter* of the *real* has been placed in opposition to the virtual.[12] Furthermore, anything created within the virtual realm is done so using digital materials, which leaves traces as material as any object crafted in the physical. As Matthew Kirschenbaum has pointed out, discussions on digital materiality often omit any mention of this, as the use of electronic data is conventionally understood to be different than other forms of physical record.[13] Considering materiality, what does it mean to have a sculptural practice that exists apart from the physical? What is it called when I can walk through the gallery on AbTeC Island and move around a virtual sculptural installation? The virtual installations are not graphic art. I have to walk around

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12   Johanna Drucker, "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality," *Parallax* 15, no. 4 (2009): 7–17.

13   Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

them. I can sit on them. I can fly over them. What defines them? Perhaps this is the fundamental question.

When describing the rapid evolution of digital media in art in the mid-1990s, Marchese and Marchese argued that "in the future, computer art will be elevated to the mainstream with other media assuming a craft status."[14] We are not in that predicted future yet, though Skawennati's work is an example of contemporary art that both challenges and disrupts existing understandings of traditional materiality. As our lives become increasingly intertwined in the virtual, a new understanding of sculptural material continues to emerge. With the growing dominance of the virtual, technologically derived mediums have grown in number.

Indeed, technological developments have been rapid in recent decades and remain ongoing. Therese Tierney argues that this, in conjunction with the trend of new theories of representations, has resulted in an unprecedented dematerialization of the art object and an ensuing ontological crisis.[15] When considering Skawennati's work, the ontological crisis described by Tierney is best placed in relation to the dilemma of materiality. To recognize the sculptural in the virtual is to shift one's understanding of sculptural materiality itself. Furthermore, to engage with this work is to affirm the art experience as nonmaterial.

I would argue that the digital materiality of Skawennati's practice, specifically the use of a virtual environment as a medium and the embodied qualities this affords for the viewer, contributes to the material permanence of her work. Moreover, I would argue that her work challenges both the equating of the digital with immateriality and the notion that virtual art contributes to an enduring dematerialization. Moreover, as Christiane Paul describes, the perceptive shift in the relation between virtuality and materiality has generated discourse on art that is created in digital spaces yet manifests in some capacity in the material realm.[16] While the terms "post-digital" and "New Aesthetic" art have been established in an effort to frame this new era of materiality, I am inclined to employ Paul's concept of "neomateriality"[17] when engaging with Skawennati's work. Not only does this concept address the ingrained confluence of digital materials present in the art, it also describes the viewer's relationship and engagement with the work as a function of this materiality.

Much of the built environment on AbTeC Island is sculptural material and sets from Skawennati's machinimas. Anyone familiar with her work will notice this immediately as they explore the island. You'll see Hunter's apartment from *Time Traveller*™ (2007–13),[18]

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14 Suzanne M. Marchese and Francis T. Marchese, "Digital Media and Ephemeralness: Art, Artist, and Viewer," *Leonardo* 28, no. 5 (1995): 433–35.

15 Therese Tierney, "Formulating Abstraction: Conceptual Art and the Architectural Object," *Leonardo* 40, no. 1 (2007): 51–43.

16 Christiane Paul, "From Immateriality to Neomateriality: Art and the Conditions of Digital Materiality," in *Proceedings of the 21st International Symposium on Electronic Art* (2015), pp. 1–4.

17 "Neomateriality describes the embeddedness of the digital in the objects, images, and structures we encounter on a daily basis and the way we understand ourselves in relation to them." Ibid., p. 2.

18 For a list of episodes of *Time Traveler*, see https://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/ (accessed October 21, 2022).

3   Skawennati, *Celestial Tree*, 2017. Machinimagraph from *She Falls for Ages.*

the Residency of the Guardian of the Celestial Tree from *She Falls for Ages* (2017),[19] and the spaceship from *The Peacemaker Returns* (2017).[20] The island serves as a space where all of these filmographic landscapes intersect. While it does grant viewers the opportunity to engage with her work in a different and nearly tangible way, the space also serves as an archive. This combination of offering the viewer an embodied experience of her art, while simultaneously collating an environmental or geographical record of it, illustrates Skawennati's mastery of digital mediums and her understanding of how viewers engage with them.

Skawennati has long imagined bringing one of her *Celestial Trees* out of the virtual realm and into the physical. The *Celestial Tree* installed in the center of AbTeC Island is the one that she always envisioned building as a three-dimensional sculpture.[21] Certain factors relating to materiality have impeded this. The size of the tree is crucial and intrinsic to the piece. It towers over the viewer in the space. To reduce its scale would be detrimental to its very concept. Considering this, physical materiality itself becomes an obstacle to constructing this piece in the real world. The larger *Celestial Tree* installed in the central courtyard of AbTeC Island, for instance, is granted aesthetic characteristics that would simply not be possible outside of the virtual. For example, the luminescence of its branches and foliage, the distinct shimmer, could very well be near-impossible to achieve using traditional materials (fig. 3).

I consider this juxtaposition of materiality as I guide my avatar around the *Celestial Tree*. We walk up close to the base of the trunk, and I tilt my head up to look at the branches.

19   Viewable at https://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/ (accessed October 21, 2022).
20   Viewable at https://vimeo.com/657110527 (accessed October 21, 2022).
21   Skawennati, personal interview, January 26, 2022.

Would I feel differently looking up at such a tree in the physical world? I'm not entirely certain. Some environmental factors are different: it's cold outside right now in the "real" world, and I'm pretty comfortable sitting inside the warmth of my apartment. The tree glows and glistens. I'm aware of its physical relationship to my avatar and I understand that I must move around it, that I am sharing space with it. How would my interaction be different if I encountered this sculpture out in the world somewhere? My avatar takes a few steps back from the tree and takes a good look before I get her to fly straight up into the air. I stop when we're high above the tree and looking down at its dazzling blossoms. Well, this is clearly a difference.

If a Tree Falls in the Virtual …

Xox wants to take me to see another *Celestial Tree* installed on the Island, but she can't quite remember where it has been moved to. I follow her lead as we fly above the landscape below, where she can get a bird's-eye view. We find it on a small patch of grass nestled between the far wall of AbTeC Gallery and the building that houses the costume gallery and photo studio.[22] Once standing on the ground next to the sculpture, I have a limited view of the rest of the island. Behind me is a great expanse of nothingness—the edge of the island. This *Celestial Tree* stands upright on a pedestal in the grass, a stark contrast to the few "natural" trees and bushes scattered nearby (fig. 4).

This sculpture is one that I have never noticed on the island before. It is much smaller than the one found in the central plaza and is aesthetically very different. It stands close in height to my avatar and is strikingly flat. It has six branches in total and a smooth white trunk with no indication of bark. At the tip of each branch there is a single brightly colored blossom. A distinct quality of this piece is its flatness. It has a pictorial, symbolic quality to it. Xox was particularly interested in showing me this sculpture, as it is an example of a work that was meant to exist exclusively in the digital and was never intended to be what it eventually grew into.

The tree looks flat because it was originally designed by Research Assistant Erica Perrault as the logo for the machinima *She Falls for Ages* (2017). Skawennati loved it so much that she felt the logo should be incorporated into the movie. And indeed, it can be found all throughout. Once you look for it in the film, you will see the motif worked into the furniture, the clothing, and even the characters themselves.[23] You'll notice it on the invitation to the party celebrating the 3,000th anniversary of the *Celestial Tree*, on the banners decorating the interior of the palatial residence of the Guardian of the *Celestial Tree*, and paved into the grounds. In the machinima, it is ultimately a two-dimensional graphic (fig. 5).

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22   The costume gallery and the photo studio are in the base of the tall building that houses Hunter's apartment from *Time Traveller*™ (2007–13). Hunter's apartment is accessible only by flight.

23   Viewable at https://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/ (accessed October 21, 2022).
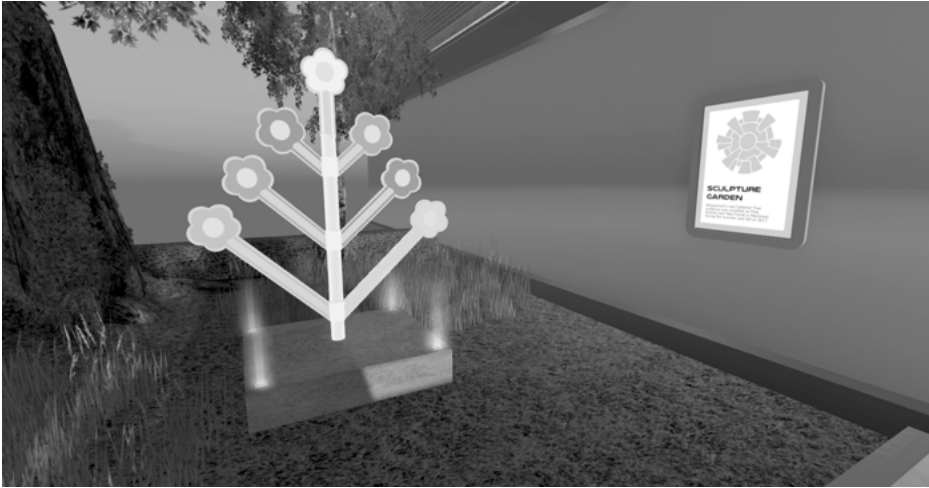
4   The *Celestial Tree* installed in the Sculpture Garden on AbTeC Island.

5   The Celestial Tree logo
from *She Falls for Ages*, 2017.

Soon after completing the machinima, Skawennati was commissioned to create a pub-lic art piece for the *Path of Resilience*, an outdoor exhibition mounted along the Promenade Fleuve-Montagne in Montreal, Canada, during the summer of 2017, the year of the city's 375th anniversary. Given the short deadline, the curator, Cheryl Sim, and Skawennati deter-mined that the piece should be conceptually rooted in existing work. With the knowledge that this would be a public artwork, Skawennati decided that the *Celestial Tree* logo, with its message of sustainability, diversity, and peace, would be appropriate. This sculpture was installed in front of the Royal Victoria Hospital, located at the highest altitude of the Prom-enade Fleuve-Montagne.[24] The path and its installations are promoted as a destination for

24   Chloë Lalonde, "The Celestial Tree inspires visions of collective action," *The Concordian*, September 5, 2017, http://theconcordian.com/2017/09/the-celestial-tree-inspires-visions-of-collective-action/(accessed October 21, 2022).

6   Skawennati with her sculpture *The Celestial Tree* on the Promenade Fleuve-Montagne for the *Path of Resilience* exhibition in 2017.

art enthusiasts, and its public nature allows for pedestrians to happen upon the works and historical sites, greatly expanding the scope of the work's audience.

The materials used to construct the public art sculpture are explicitly industrial and were chosen to invoke the urban environment in which the piece was displayed. The trunk is made of a thick steel pole, the kind that would be used for a stop sign. Likewise, the branches and flowers are fabricated using the same aluminum and retro-reflective sheeting that standard road signs are made of. The tree features six large and colorful flowers at the tips of each of its branches. A monochromatic white flower adorns the tip of the trunk. Each of the six colors represent a skin tone used in *She Falls for Ages*, invoking a sense of unity and shared humanity (fig. 6).

Skawennati retained the aesthetic quality of the logo when building both the virtual and physical versions of this sculpture. Her choice to maintain the flat and graphic quality of the tree, even as it was moved to the physical world and constructed with three-dimensional materials, communicates the roots of the piece. Furthermore, it forces the viewer to engage with the interrelation of virtual and physical that exists in all of the artist's work. This particular tree exists across multiple environments and in multiple mediums.[25] Its various iterations and locations for installation challenge the understanding of how sculptural works can be viewed and experienced by a public audience (fig. 7).

25   The three-dimensional sculpture was purchased by the Peabody Essex Museum and is now in their collection, providing viewers with a different context in which to engage with the work.

7   Skawennati, *The Celestial Tree*, 2017. Steel, aluminum, and retro-reflective sheeting.

Unique to this particular piece is the fact that Skawennati moved this tree from the virtual to the physical (and back again). It's true that the metal tree sculpture is identical to the digital sculpture installed on the patch of grass on AbTeC Island that xox showed me, but it is not a replica of the virtual installation. The street sign *Celestial Tree* was the first of the two sculptures. The tree was built first as a physical sculpture based on a graphic design, and secondly as a digital sculpture based on the physical, and then lastly installed in a virtual world.

As with any traditional exhibition space, audiences choose to visit AbTeC Island to experience the work on display. With the public installation of the tree in a physical urban environment, a new audience was given an opportunity to engage with it. Was this installation actually more public—and therefore more accessible—than those exhibited in the virtual environments? One could argue that displaying sculptural work in a virtual environment allows an exponentially larger number of viewers to experience it and engage with it. However, discussions concerning the accessibility of digital exhibition spaces are ongoing, decidedly muddying the answer to that question.

Digital Sculpture and Accessibility

Since the fall of 2021, Skawennati's piece *A Slice of Skyworld* has been on display at New Art City,[26] a virtual art space. This digital exhibition platform exists solely in cyberspace and features a variety of virtual environmental installations by contemporary artists. *A Slice of Skyworld* is one of nine works currently on display. Visitors are invited to enter these virtual environments and explore the worlds within, using their keyboards to walk around. With only an internet connection and a device with which to connect, you can visit this gallery and engage with the exhibited art from anywhere in the world.

Once inside Skawennati's installation, you find yourself in a misty pink world. The floor is made of large white hexagonal tiles, giving the impression that you may be in a space somewhere between indoors and outdoors. It could be a circular courtyard of sorts. You are immediately drawn to the large Celestial Tree that sits in the center of the space, towering so high you have to look up to see the top. Colorful flowers bloom from its craggy branches, and it glows with an iridescent purple light (fig. 8).

Lining the perimeter of the space is a series of alternating benches and tall cylinders. As you approach the cylinders, you recognize them as wide glass tubes, the kind you might see in a science-fiction movie, perhaps in a top-secret government lab holding a preserved alien specimen. Except instead of a humanoid creature suspended in formalin, there is a single flower from the tree floating in the tube and slowly spinning. The benches are also floating, casting light on the tiles where one might expect to see shadow.

Anyone who has travelled to AbTeC Island will recognize this sculpture. This is the same *Celestial Tree* that is installed in the central plaza. In fact, *A Slice of Skyworld* is a remix of one of the sets used in the machinima *She Falls for Ages* (2017). With this installation, Skawennati is again inviting her audience to engage with both the sculpture and the machinima in an entirely new way. Similar to what visitors of AbTeC Island might experience, or pedestrians strolling the Promenade Fleuve-Montagne, viewers have the opportunity to physically explore a part of the film rather than simply watching it on a screen.

When considering accessibility, the potential that creating and displaying art in virtual environments is also illustrated by AbTeC Island. This territory in cyberspace acts as a space for artistic practices and conversations—a virtual studio—as well as a gallery space in which viewers can interact with completed works. AbTeC Gallery opened on the island as a virtual exhibition space in 2020 and has mounted six group exhibitions to date.[27] With AbTeC's initiative *Activating AbTeC Island*, Skawennati and her team have further increased the accessibility of this world. By inviting the public into the territory, new possibilities for community-building and engagement have emerged.

26 "A Slice of Skyworld by Skawennati," https://newart.city/show/gaf2021-room-8, 2021 (accessed October 21, 2022).

27 "AbTeC Gallery," indigenousfutures.net, n.d., https://indigenousfutures.net/other/abtec-gallery/ (accessed October 21, 2022).
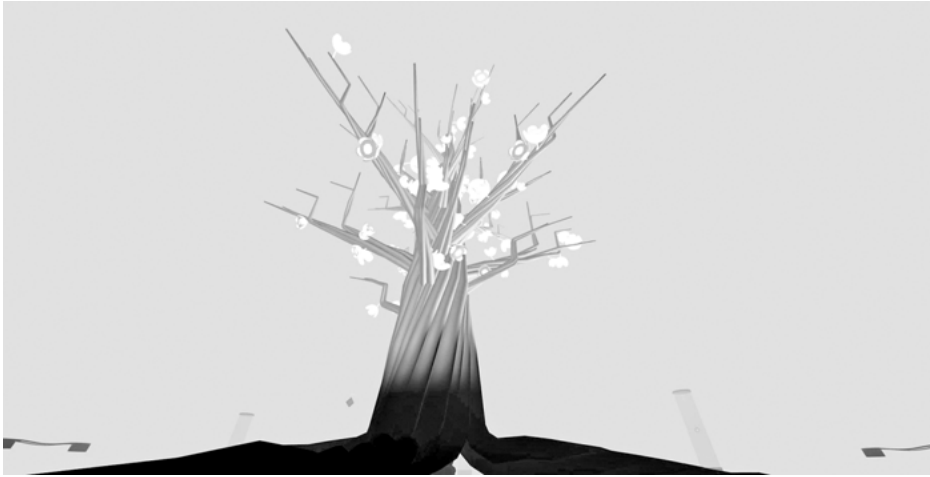
8   Skawennati, *A Slice of Skyworld*, 2021. Virtual installation.

The concerns of the late twentieth century regarding the inability to truly experience art through digital means have faded. We experience and engage with art in digital spaces constantly in our daily lives. These spaces have also become where we learn, work, play, and connect with others. Virtual environments like Second Life elevate this engagement. They facilitate immersive community spaces that exist in parallel with the "real" world. As is the case with all community spaces, virtual community spaces have the ability to shape collective memory.[28] When people visit AbTeC Island, they are not just looking at art and exploring the built environment. They are interacting, speaking, learning, and sometimes even creating. This experience requires real engagement and participation from the viewer, and it is often communal in nature. Recognizing the power and possibility in the virtual environment is central to much of Skawennati's work. Indeed, her oeuvre is not composed of just sculptures and machinimas, but also the very environments in which these works are created, and the inclusion of the viewer within them.

New media art exclusively available to be viewed on the internet is growing in popularity, and the replacement of the physical gallery by the computer screen is radical. It not only threatens the hegemonic qualities of the "white cube" space, an often intimidating and exclusive space, but also calls into question the supremacy of traditional materiality itself. In this way, virtual exhibitions challenge understandings of the accessibility of contemporary art. In point of fact, the practice of art being displayed exclusively in the virtual has increased significantly throughout the current global pandemic, emphasizing the accessible nature of

28   Analays Alvarez Hernandez, "The Life and Death of the Monument in the Era of Social Networks: New Communities of Memory," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 46, no. 2 (2021): 75–84.

the medium. Quite simply, online exhibitions enable audiences to access and interact with art from any physical location. Creating work that is accessible on an individual level from a comfortable space actively increased viewer engagement. Viewing is an act in and of itself, facilitating a transformation of meaning and understanding within both the artwork and its spectator.[29]

Though the rise of the virtual exhibition space has contributed to the increased openness of these institutional environments, familiar concerns surrounding the accessibility of museums and art galleries in general have carried from the physical world to the digital. As Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Elena Stylianou argue with regard to the virtual art museum, accessibility measured by the ease and sense of confidence with which an audience views and engages with work is not reliant on the exhibition space being either virtual or physical.[30] The art gallery persists as a space where certain viewers are privileged based on their familiarity and comfort levels in such environments. To me, this represents one of the most significant barriers to accessibility in the digital context. In considering AbTeC Island specifically, I would argue that Skawennati and her team are working to dismantle this barrier—redefining the virtual exhibition space as an open and welcoming environment.[31]

There is one last factor on the topic accessibility that is often not mentioned when considering traditional sculptural practices: the financial cost of the physical materials themselves. Constructing large three-dimensional sculptures using traditional materials takes a great deal of financial resources, resulting in a profound barrier. Artists are often reliant on funding or patronage for large-scale projects, a reality that is arguably further constrictive when considering works created in the physical world. While the labor, time, and resources required to sculpt in the digital are plentiful,[32] immediate financial costs are significantly lessened. The development of digital sculpture, and virtual art practices more broadly, have released artists from long-established economic restrictions regarding materiality.

Cybrid Art and Embodiment

Xox suggests that we sit down somewhere for a chat and asks me if I've visited the palatial residence yet. I hadn't, so we head in that direction. The palace is a huge structure on the central plaza and is a set piece from *She Falls for Ages*. There are stairs wrapped along the exterior that provide access to the upper floors. The stairs don't have a railing, so I carefully direct my avatar to climb them and hope that she doesn't topple over the edge to the

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29 Jacques Rancière and Gregory Elliot, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

30 Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert and Elena Stylianou, "A Third Space: Reconsidering Issues of Neutrality and Accessibility in the Virtual Art Museum," *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts (EVA 2010)* (2010): 66–71, doi: 10.14236/ewic/EVA2010.12.

31 My experiences visiting AbTeC Island as a new user of Second Life and the *Activating AbTeC Island* initiative are examples of this.

32 There do exist very real technological limitations when creating in the virtual. Skawennati herself has discussed the common fallacy that digital art takes less resources than more traditional modes of creation.

ground below. We enter the magical room that takes up the entire top floor of the palace (it happens to be the bedroom of the Guardian of the *Celestial Tree*) and settle into two large armchairs positioned on either side of a low table. With xox sitting across from me, I find myself thinking about this world that Skawennati has built and the materials she has used to do so.

Timothy Binkley has argued that a computer should be thought of not as a tool or medium, but rather as a "manager of complexity that can be summoned to be active creative partners."[33] He goes on to consider the virtual object and artists working in virtual spaces, arguing that the virtual artist is faced with problems completely different from artists working in traditional media. Namely, artists of virtual reality must question not what to portray as an appearance, but what to describe as an environment.[34] This is in reference to the intrinsically participatory nature of the virtual space. When Skawennati is sculpting in the digital realm, the piece extends beyond traditional aesthetic and conceptual considerations: the sculpture is also an immersive and often interactive, social experience. I argue that this is especially true of the sculptural works created in social virtual worlds.

In 2009, Patrick Lichty outlined four modalities of art being produced in virtual worlds.[35] The first is Transmediated, meaning work that is basically traditional art translated to the virtual. Evergent art is physical work that is realized from virtual origins. Client/Browser (this he defines as virtual itself) is designed entirely for the client/browser experience. And lastly, Cybrid is defined as work that exists concurrently between various modalities. My impulse is to categorize Skawennati's work as Cybrid art. However, this label seems insufficient. I can think of pieces that fit with each of the four, or move back and forth between multiple. While Skawennati has worked with the concept of transmediation throughout her career, her practice is too multi-layered and complex to fit comfortably within this category.

Elaborating on Lichty's four modalities, Denise Doyle presents a framework for the emergent imagination that is particular to user-generated and avatar-mediated virtual spaces, such as Second Life. Doyle argues that the vectors of movement among the four modalities can be considered to denote the directions and creations of meaning between the physical world and the virtual world, or within virtual spaces themselves. These movements, or spaces in transition, generate meaning and could be considered movements of the imagination. Doyle's emergent imagination framework comes into view in these transitional spaces, and the conditions for its appearance are both in the act of creating and the outcome of the creative act itself.[36] When considering Skawennati's work through this framework, the vectors of movement and transitional spaces become apparent.

33   Timothy Binkley, "The Quickening of Galatea: Virtual Creation without Tools or Media," *Art Journal* 49, no. 3 (1990): 234.
34   Ibid., 237.
35   Patrick Lichty, "The Translation of Art in Virtual Worlds," in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 444.
36   Denise Doyle, "Art, Virtual Worlds and the Emergent Imagination," *Leonardo* 48, no. 3 (2015): 244–50.

9 xox (left) and I chatting in the bedroom of the Residency of the Guardian of the Celestial Tree, 2022.

Though I understand the pieces that I am viewing in virtual worlds to be digital sculpture, the classification feels too limited. Doyle's framework is of particular interest when considering embodiment and imaginative experience in virtual art: "Within the framework of the emergent imagination, the experience of embodiment and the associated imagination of the senses may explain the visceral and material responses to the phenomenological experience in virtual space."[37] When I engage with Skawennati's work in a virtual environment, when I stand beneath *The Celestial Tree* on AbTeC Island, or have a conversation with another avatar, what I am experiencing is distinct from watching one of her machinimas, or from seeing one of her pieces in the physical world. I am both a viewer and a participant (fig. 9).

Back to the Island

I returned to AbTeC Island several times while writing this essay, often alone and at odd hours. I spend time flying around and looking at the ground below. I walk to the edges of the environment and look around the nooks and crannies. I visit every building meticulously and come across installations by different artists that I had never noticed before. I have some quiet moments in the spaceship by myself. I start to notice when small changes are made—things move around in between my visits. Just as it is when I walk around my neighborhood in the physical world, the environment here is not static.

I visit the two *Celestial Trees* on AbTeC Island and think about their material similarities and aesthetic differences as I move around them. Both of them—in fact this whole environment and my body within it—are the product of a digital materiality still not entirely defined. I consider the fact that I did not travel to Montreal during the summer of 2017 and

37   Ibid., 249.

walk along the Promenade Fleuve-Montagne. I never saw that tree installed in the physical world, on display for the passing public, and I wonder how it might have felt to do so. Would it feel different? I think of Skawennati's desire to bring the tree from the central plaza out of the virtual and into the physical. Will I get to experience that one day?

Above all else, I think of the accessibility of this place. I think of what it was like the first time I visited the island. Some of it consisted of learning how to walk and fly, falling off of the edges of structures, and getting stuck in walls. But it also involved exploring and engaging with a built environment filled with art and community, all from the comfort of my home. To move around the island, and to engage with the sculptures installed on it, is to understand myself as a part of it. As a viewer, as a subject, and as an avatar, it is clear that I am intrinsically connected to the digital materiality of this world. This materiality is immersive, interactive, and experiential by nature. With these sculptures, Skawennati has conceived an entirely new framework for how viewers engage with art.

These digital sculptures are all rooted in Skawennati's expanding machinima catalogue. Her machinimas are powerful narratives that handle themes of futurity, decolonial history, and feminism, all with an undercurrent of utopic possibilities and joy. Her films show us futures that celebrate Indigenous sovereignty and cultures, challenging and dismantling colonial narratives, and imagining a better world for all of humanity. Skawennati has built the worlds she imagines using the creative possibilities afforded by Second Life. With this virtual world as a medium, these possibilities are not limited to building film sets and making art. However, she is not just physically pulling the viewer into the virtual; she is breaking out of cyberspace and building that world in the physical environment as well.