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[Second Life as an Archaeological Tool \(Podcast Episode 5\)](#)

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by [NCPTT](#)

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Kevin Ammons: Welcome to the Preservation Technology podcast. I am Kevin Ammons. Today I am visiting with [Ruth Tringham](#), one of the founders of the University of California Berkley the [People in Multimedia Authoring Center for Teaching in Anthropology at Berkley \(MACTIA\)](#). As a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Berkley Ruth uses an online virtual environment called Second Life in her teaching.

Kevin Ammons: Welcome Ruth! How did you find yourself at Berkley exploring the notion of [Second Life](#) as an archeological tool?

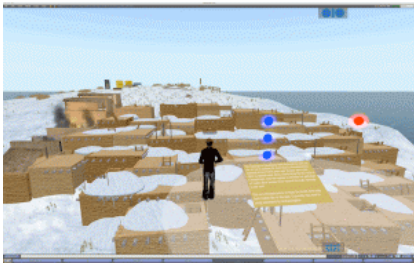


Çatalhöyük (image courtesy of catalhoyuk.com)

Ruth Tringham: Well it sort of developed out of my work with digital forms of visualization things like multimedia 3D modeling and of neolithic archaeological sites in southeast Europe and in Anatolian more recently with [Çatalhöyük](#). I actually did know anything about Second Life. It must of been in the early 2000's because I had been doing this visualization multimedia stuff for - all through the 90's - at least the last part of the 90's. But then I was working with this digital technologist I suppose is not really that he is somebody who worked with museums and digital technology called Noah Whitman. He started working with us on a project called [Remixing Çatalhöyük](#) and I can tell you about that a little later but while we were working on that, which was really a method of sharing our Çatalhöyük media database with the public, he introduced me to Second Life. He said, "Have you seen this? You might be interested in this."

Ruth Tringham: And so I of course immediately said "Oh my God, it's exactly what I have been waiting for!" And it was! And it was early in 2007 that our team UC Berkley with the students, archaeologists, and media specialist began using Second Life to develop a [virtual reconstruction of this iconic Neolithic settlement at Çatalhöyük](#) in present day Turkey and the way this project was conceived was as complimentary to this concurrent project of Remixing Çatalhöyük which is this online exhibition and resource. So we purchased our virtual island. We were so enthusiastic about it that we actually purchased a virtual land thanks to our contacts in the UC Berkley information technology service.

Ruth Tringham: We were especially thankful of the support of this guy called David Greenbound and we named it Okapi Island which might seem weird because what is Okapi which is an east African animal got to do with Çatalhöyük in Turkey. Okapi Island is actually named after our sponsor which is the open knowledge and the public interest program who the that was our program that was creating this Remixing Çatalhöyük the sharing of Çatalhöyük through open knowledge software. Open knowledge the idea that all of our data should be sharable through a Creative Commons License, a Share Alike attribution but it is ambiguous whether we would allow it for commercial use. But the problem at this point is that these media and the data and everything else that we do is sharable without the constriction or the copyright or the royalty type of license.



Çatalhöyük in Second Life

Ruth Tringham: So that was what [Okapi Island](#) is all about as well. So the team meets face to face Okapi Island team meets face to face every week in our computer laboratory call the MACTIA, the People in Multimedia Authoring Center for Teaching in Anthropology at Berkley. In world we meet on [our virtual property in Second Life](#). Actually, currently one of our undergraduate students team member is leading these meetings through teaching a decal, what is called a decal course at Berkley, for ten registered students. Decal course is short for democratization of teaching. So I sponsor this course but I do it since I am on sabbatical I do it off in world in Second Life from my home. And I'm doing it along with my college and archeology and new media doctoral student Cally Morgan and she and Noah Witman and our long time colleague Michael Ashley. We find that Second Life is the potential as a way of embedding archaeological research that is its database and its interpretations in a game like environment.

Kevin Ammons: [What exactly is Second Life?](#)

Ruth Tringham: It's an online environment that has game-like immersion and social media functionality without game like goals and rules they say that at the heart is a sense of presence with others at the same time and in the same place and I think that is a really good way of describing it there is another definition which was provided by this group called move nations moves I do not know if you know that Second Life is a move its stands for m-u-v-e that is it stands for massively multi use of virtual environment and there are others there are other worlds like Second Life but not as open.

Ruth Tringham: They include things like open crochet there is one called Open Sim, there is once called Twinity and there another called THERE. That is t-h-e-r-e not t-h-e-i-r. And then there is another one called Coniva. I have not actually visited any of these. I know that I have visited Open Sim and it's open source unlike Second Life which is propriety. Open Sim has much of the characteristics and even the interface of Second Life but it is its actually a little more difficult to use.

Kevin Ammons: What is it about Second Life that you think people find compelling?



Food storage room

Ruth Tringham: I love that question. That is because there are some things which are quit compelling and it depends on who you are whether you are going find these things compelling. I find the some of the compelling things I have talked about the events the meeting my colleagues and being able to talk to my colleagues in place in Second Life I find this very compelling. I find this whole creating a community of your island and of the people who come and visit I find that really compelling. When I am visiting a place I find that one of the things that I hate are places that are empty and there is something creepy about Second Life that will put people off and that is that if there is not any events going on. You go to visit a place your likely not to find anyone there except perhaps some of these none non player sims which I find as creepy as no one being there. So I find these empty places very, very repelling and I do not know the answer to that is but to have constant events or to at least have the idea that this island is not abandoned.



Map of the island

Ruth Tringham: There (should be) signs up there (that there) is going to be an event here at such and such. We do not do this. We should. I wanted us to have an event. Some kind of an event at least each month. We have not done that. We've had a couple each year and I think that to really make an island popular and not repelling you need to have some kind of activity there that everyone knows about each month. We tend to so to have this idea that this place is not empty because that will put people off the creepiness of the empty places I think going along with that if you visit a place and there's nothing to do there or nothing really there is not much guidance there. You're not sure what's going on you just sort of twitter around you move around and birds are twittering and oh it is very beautiful and the wind is rustling people say this is poetic and so is lovely and I don't find it myself very attractive. Many people do but I don't. If there are assets, that can be things like gestures or scripts, available for free there are some some sites like that I find these great what I find repelling is where people are trying to make money out of there out of there building or or even money out of something else there actually trying to sell I find the commercial sites quit repelling about Second Life some people don't some people find this is as fun as eBay or something like that I'm not an eBay person so you can see I don't really go for any of this buying in Second Life.

Kevin Ammons: What can Second Life offer archaeologist in the realm of interpretation that other traditional approaches can not?

Ruth Tringham: One of the things about Second Life is that you as a residence you can create your own game like place context you can create buildings you could create. They won't look as good as some of the game engines, but they are you do have it in your power to create these built environments and so that is one of the things which can really attract people. I think like heritage professionals possibly to use Second Life rather than to try to use something like some of the more famous game engines.

Ruth Tringham: I mean the famous game engines they are just beautiful they are just fantastic and I would love to do that. But if you remember Myst, the Myst stuff is very beautiful but the movement through it is for the most part quit clumsy.

Kevin Ammons: Is this something that you imagine will be possible for archeology when you embarked on your new career as a new professor?

Ruth Tringham: When I started excavating or when I started being a professional archaeologist in the 1970's I've dreamed of being able to enter my data and write on my own computers and so I dreamed of that and in the 1980's I got my own computer and could enter my own data into an Excel or something like that whatever the equivalent of Excel was later on and in the 1980s I dreamed I would be able to create models of Neolithic buildings in three dimensions like architectural cardboard models and that I would be able to model prehistoric scenes and access. That's what I dreamed in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2002, I was in a conference talking about game engines. There were these gamers at this conference called Siggraph Campfire and I was invited to go there with Michael Ashley because we'd been working on these hypermedia things about archeology and bringing in three dimensional imagery into thinking about places in the past. So we were invited to this 2002 conference and there were all these gaming people and laser scanning people and high tech people who showed us what they could do.

Ruth Tringham: I went to another conference in 2003 in Vienna right they were using [Unreal](#), thinking about [using Unreal for archaeology](#). I was "Oh my God, it would be fantastic to use a gaming engine to try to think about all of the alternatives paths that people could take through their life histories!" Whether we were thinking about life histories of buildings and life histories of people and places and things for archaeology, wouldn't it be great to embed these ideas into a game engine?

Kevin Ammons: What was the most difficult thing for you in using Second Life for archaeological interpretation?

Ruth Tringham: It is difficult. Like any modeling program, it has challenges and frustrations. But you don't have to be a complete computer geek to do it, which is what really makes it different from many of the other MUVes. It also makes it different from using the game engines. With game engines you have to be a real computer specialist for that. This mean going into a very different sphere of money and interaction. I mean, okay, so you have to pay for your Second Life island if you want to build on it, but you can actually always visit some of these free buildings to mess around in their sandboxes. You can [come to Okapi Island](#) and build whatever you like in our sandbox and it's big enough to experiment. You could

build a small model that would stay persistent if you wanted, so that don't have to have your own land to build. Again, this makes it very different from many places. One of the things that I am always sorry about in Second Life is that I can't make life messy enough. I can't make the surfaces messy but that's the same in any computer (virtual reality). They can't even make the places messy with all of the the fancy gaming engines.

Kevin Ammons: Ruth thanks for joining us today. If you would like to learn more about the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, visit our website at www.ncptt.nps.gov. Until next time, goodbye everybody.

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