

Cosmic Tripping in Second Life

An online clinic is conducting trials of a drug for avatars. Here's the story.

Marie Lechner, Libération, Saturday September 20th 2008

You probably already know Salvia, the Mexican hallucinogenic plant with dazzling effects, which has been named the YouTube drug. But have you heard about Virta-Flaneurazine (VF), a programmable drug developed by Doctors John Craig Freeman and Will Pappenheimer, which allows users to trip in virtual worlds, more precisely in Second Life?

Our avatar walks through the door of the newly opened private clinic and volunteers for the clinical trial of VF. After filling in the medical questionnaire, he swallows the promising blue and white VF pill (Warning: not recommended for those under 18 years of age) and a group of flying toads make their appearance. However, these toads are not a hallucination. They are actually the guinea pigs that have been widely used in the clinical testing that has been taking place in Second Life. "These are a specific kind of toad that secrete bufotenine", explain the doctors. They state that they have been studying this toxin in their work synthesizing Virta-Flaneurazine, which has many of the same effects. Indeed, hippies have long sucked on these amphibians because of the euphoric feelings they offer.

But it doesn't take long for the drug to have its first effects. The avatar becomes uncontrollable, its movements uncoordinated and its words meaningless. Then a severe fever takes hold and the avatar jumps from one place to the other unpredictably, tossed about between unknown corners of the virtual world. It is ensnared by the multicoloured tentacles of a jellyfish, then is grabbed in a dark corridor. Night and day, day and night follow on from each other at a frantic pace. And the avatar doesn't just experience distortions of space and time, but also visual hallucinations. The environment becomes distorted and seems to be sucked into a tunnel. The avatar is entirely disorientated and roams endlessly through cyberspace.

"The drug thwarts any inclination the avatar might have, or any attempt it might make, to go in a specific direction or to reach a particular destination. This psychotronic drug belongs to the Wanderment family and for the 4-12 hours when it is releasing its effect, it sentences the user to wander through the lands of the virtual world. This is equivalent of the dawdling and drifting preached by the Situationists for the digital age and it allows us to look at Second Life in an entirely new way." The doctors recommend users have regular consultations in both their Second Life clinic and at the branch which is located in the "real world" at the "Fringe" contemporary art gallery in Los Angeles until October 4th.

"It is important to study the relationship of real world to virtual experience since the two are inextricably linked." Patients are asked a range of questions so as to better understand the drug and its effects. Hallucinations, euphoria, paranoia, overheating of the computer, neurosis, panic attacks, frequent need to urinate, crashes, swelling, cramps, sexual ambiguity, sweaty palms, absolute need to keep moving: these are all on the list of side effects listed by the doctors. "Only people who have sufficient

computer memory for the video and are healthy enough for extreme virtual adventures should take this drug. And it can be addictive”. According to the doctors the first trials have been conclusive and they hope that they will soon be able to offer a dosage adapted for individual users and thus position themselves on the lucrative recreational drugs market.