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At Sundance, a Second Life Sweatshop Is Art

By [KATIE HAFNER](#)

TAGS: [INVISIBLE THREADS](#), [SECOND LIFE](#), [SUNDANCE](#)

One of the more exotic premieres at this year's [Sundance Film Festival](#) is "Invisible Threads." It's not a movie, but a virtual sweat shop that exists only on Second Life, the online virtual world, yet produces real-life, custom-ordered, personalized blue jeans.

Stephanie Rothenberg, a new media performance artist, and her collaborator, Jeff Crouse, a digital artist and programmer, started Invisible Threads a year ago while at [Eyebeam](#), an art and technology center in New York. Invisible Threads is intended as art, but they see it as a window into so-called telemetric manufacturing methods of the future.

So Ms. Rothenberg was invited to Sundance as an artist who incorporates film and video.

The jeans are being shown and sold for the first time at Sundance, in a beta version.

Customers tell the Invisible Threads staff the size and style of jean they would like, the instructions are sent to the virtual factory inside Second Life, where workers push buttons that generate an image. From that image, a pattern is created and sent to an industrial printer, made by Hewlett-Packard, which spits out the custom-printed canvas cotton patterns. The patterns are then cut and assembled on the spot (at a Sundance Festival venue, that is) with a glue gun and a little stitching for reinforcement. They cost around \$35.

The margins are pretty good. The Invisible Threads "factory" has sixteen workers, who are paid 200 Lindens an hour – about 90 cents, which is pretty good pay by Second Life standards. Factory workers are also granted 500 square meters of Second Life "land" on which to build a house.

"What I think is fascinating about her work is that it is a step towards what our future is going to be," said Jeffrey Winter, a panel programmer for the Sundance Festival who focuses on media, art and technology. "It's called art now, but in the future it's going to be how you get your jeans. It will be daily life. So often what you call art is just people who see the future before the rest of us do."

Ms. Rothenberg, who has an interest in the politics of labor, agreed. She said the project is evolving into something less about art and "more about telematic labor."



Inside the Invisible Threads virtual factory. (Courtesy of Sundance Film Festival)

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