

Facing Realities

An Introduction to Second Life

On July 12, 2006, my avatar North Lamar was “rez-zed” (created) in the virtual world of Second Life. I had 250 Linden Dollars (the virtual currency of Second Life and the equivalent of about \$1 U.S.), a torch, a flamingo, and a few outfits for my avatar. I initially joined Second Life while working as an instructional technologist on a project for an English professor named Dr. Jerome Bump at the University of Texas at Austin. He had been using a Web-based MOO (MUD Object Orientated visual chat client) in his undergraduate English course for several years, and he was eager to try a 3-D virtual world. As an instructional technologist at the University of Texas at Austin, I was assigned to provide technical and pedagogical assistance to him. We launched his course in Second Life in the fall of 2006. My experiences in Second Life have ultimately been shaped from two perspectives: my perspective as an instructional designer and also as a doctoral student researcher.

I didn’t create an account in Second Life to explore a virtual world or to live a “second” life. From the beginning of my work in Second Life, my interest was in using the virtual world as an instructional technology and providing technical support to university faculty. My initial goal was to quickly master the technical aspects of Second Life so that I could devise a plan for faculty development. Starting in July 2006, I spent about thirty hours a week learning how to build objects out of “prims.” Prims, or primitives, are basic building objects like boxes, cylinders, spheres, tori, and prisms that can be manipulated to create everything from chairs to auditoriums, musical instruments, and even automobiles in Second Life. By the fall of 2006, I was comfortable enough with Second Life to use it in an undergraduate information studies course I was teaching called Social Issues in a Networked Society.

Second Life is a virtual world owned by Linden Lab with over fifteen million users. It is currently one of the most popular 3-D social virtual worlds. Second Life is comprised of simulations known as islands. A single server supports four islands, and each server ideally runs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. As of October 2008, Second Life contained an estimated 32,000 islands.¹ In addition to land, Second Life consists of users in the form of avatars, a virtual currency called Linden Dollars, and objects created out of prims. Many organizations currently own land in Second Life, including both the non-profit and for-profit sectors. IBM and Sun Microsystems are two of the larger corporations utilizing Second Life, while the American Library Association is an example of a non-profit professional organization with a Second Life presence.² Second Life contains the following features: land, communication, groups, navigation, economy, events, and user-generated content.

Two types of land are available in Second Life: mainland and private estates. Mainland is land that may be purchased directly from Linden Lab or from individual real estate agents. Mainland is connected into continents that total 5,000 regions,³ and owners of mainland must pay a monthly tier fee in addition to the purchase price of their land. A tier fee is charged based on the amount of land a user owns. Private estates are typically purchased by a single person or organization and are then divided into smaller pieces for designated projects or sold to other Second Life users. Private estates do not have to be connected to the mainland in Second Life. For instance, if a university purchases a private estate, it may want to keep its land separated from the mainland to reduce the likelihood of having a neighboring island with adult content.

Communication in Second Life typically occurs as text chat or through voice chat. Both voice and text chat can be through an open channel, a private instant messaging channel, or a group-messaging channel. Additionally, during events like conferences or concerts, communication may occur through streaming media from a real-life place into Second Life. A typical visit to Second Life may involve a variety of general text chat mixed with private instant messaging and announcements through group chat. Table 1 identifies ways in which text or voice communication may occur between single users, within groups of avatars in Second Life, or between Second Life users and face-to-face audiences.

Users with similar interests can meet and communicate in Second Life through the use of groups. For example, one active group is Librarians of Second Life. The group consists of real-life librarians who collaborate in Second Life to provide reference services to Second Life users and to create a library community in the virtual world. Members of Librarians of Second Life host events like Banned Books Week, seminars, and training sessions, and they staff a reference desk at Info International Island. Groups within Second Life can communicate with each of their members through group chats; they can send announcements, vote on proposals, and own land together. Many groups own land in Second Life, and they may set their land to allow access only to members of a particular group in order to ensure that their land is secure.

Groups of avatars in Second Life host a variety of activities, including activism, role-playing, as well as social and professional events. An example of a social event would be a themed activity like an 80s prom night at a dance club, whereas an example of a professional event might be a Second Life training session on How to Build a Waterfall or Scripting 101. Aside from Second Life training sessions, some groups host professional development events. For example, the American Sociology Association hosted a panel session about the social impact of technology in New York and in Second Life simultaneously. Panelists submitted papers via e-mail and selected authors were asked to present their work in Second Life to a virtual audience.⁴ Activism is another type of group activity taking place in Second Life. During the fall of 2007, Italian employees of IBM held a strike in Second Life demanding higher wages. The virtual strike took place at IBM-owned islands in Second Life.⁵ Role-playing is also popular in Second Life, with many social groups like Tombstone, Gor, and the Renaissance created with role-playing as a primary focus.

Organizations within Second Life use a variety of Web 2.0 applications to support their virtual world activities. Large groups like Librarians of Second Life and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) use tools like Google Groups, Flickr, and WordPress blogs to organize their Second Life activities. YouTube is also frequently used by groups in Second Life to share tutorials,

Text and Voice Communication in Second Life		
Type of Communication	How Communication Occurs	Example
General text chat	from multiple users to multiple users	Avatars chat in a public area.
Private messaging	one to one	Two users have a private conversation through IM.
Group text chat	from one to many	A group announces that an event is about to begin
Group notice	from multiple group members to multiple group members	Members of a group collaborate to solve a problem.
	from group officers to group members	A group owner sends a notice of an upcoming event to group members.
Group proposal	from group officers to group members	A group is asked to vote on a resolution.
Streaming audio	from one (broadcaster) to many (listeners)	An audio stream from a face-to-face conference is streamed into Second Life..
Streaming video	from one (broadcaster) to many or one (viewer)	A video tutorial is streamed into Second Life via YouTube.
Voice chat	among two or more users	A poetry reading and discussion takes place between users via voice chat.

Table 1
Text and voice communication in Second Life.

distribute promotional pieces for their virtual campuses, and host Second Life screencasts called machinima. Other groups use e-mail lists to communicate between groups and individuals; one example is the SLED, or Second Life Education list, sponsored by Linden Lab, which includes approximately 3,800 people. The SLED list is used to announce events, grant proposals, and call for journal submissions. It is also a place to find technical or pedagogical support between users.

Facing Realities

The use of Second Life by libraries and universities has become a hotly debated topic in Library and Information Science circles, as is evident in the multiple threads of the jESSE discussion list in October 2008.⁶ To simplify the debate, early adopters of Second Life have been called evangelists, while nonusers of Second Life have been called Luddites who “don’t get it.” My goal in this report isn’t to feed the fire on either side of the debate, but rather to inform readers about the historical foundations of virtual worlds and to provide concrete examples of how virtual worlds have been used in the teaching and learning process from K-12 through higher education. My hope is to go beyond the possible uses of Second Life and report about the *actual* uses of Second Life.

When articles about Second Life are written, key criticisms of the virtual world are often glanced over or not acknowledged at all. I want to highlight six areas that should be of concern for librarians or administrators who are currently thinking about whether or not to begin exploring a possible presence or program in Second Life.

1. **Second Life loses 90% of new users.** Philip Rosedale, former Linden Lab CEO, explained to Wagner James Au that Second Life suffers from a user-retention problem. Only 10 percent of newly created residents are still logging in to Second Life weekly three months after creating their accounts.⁷ The low retention rate of users is due to several factors, some of which are documented interface and technical difficulties. Second Life has developed a reputation for having a high learning curve, and many users are overwhelmed by the array of menu items and vast number of spaces to visit.
2. **Second Life is proprietary software on a closed grid owned by Linden Lab.** Second Life is proprietary software and remains on a closed network, unlike a web server that a library might host on a site connected to a network allowing access to the Web. Being on a closed grid running proprietary software makes a library dependent on Linden Lab and subject to fluctuations in price.

ing. For example, in November 2006, the monthly service fee for a region in Second Life increased from \$195 to \$295.⁸ In October 2008, Linden Lab increased the price of Openspace sims 66 percent, from \$75 to \$125.⁹ An island in Second Life can be split into four separate islands that share the same amount of resources as one island (15,000 prims) but the open space gives the appearance of a landmass of four islands. The recent price increase will undoubtedly affect many libraries with a presence or program in Second Life.

3. **Intellectual property rights remain with the content creator.** A misconception often heard during debates about Second Life is that Linden Lab owns the intellectual property of goods created within the virtual world. Section 3.2 of the Second Life Terms of Service states, “You retain copyright and other intellectual property rights with respect to Content you create in Second Life. . . .”¹⁰ In his book *The Making of Second Life*, Wagner James Au describes a conversation between Lawrence Lessig and Linden Lab management. During the conversation, Lessig made a reference to the company’s slogan, “Your World. Your Imagination.” He suggested that the company live up to its rhetoric and grant rights to the content creators within Second Life. Linden Lab agreed, and since then, copyright has remained with the content creators.¹¹
4. **Second Life is an over-hyped technology.** Between the summers of 2006 and 2007, Second Life was at the peak of inflated expectations.¹² It seemed that every major publication was rushing to have a story about virtual millionaires, land barons, major retailers entering the virtual world market, or political candidates pandering to their virtual constituents; even my work received national media attention. Within a year, retailers like American Apparel, AOL, Wells Fargo, and Starwood Hotels left Second Life as quickly as they had entered.¹³ Second Life is a hot technology, but in reality it is very far away from being mainstream.¹⁴
5. **A Second Life presence must be managed and cultivated.** Part of the reason companies such as American Apparel and the NBA failed to succeed in Second Life is that they didn’t cultivate a user base or adequately manage their community.¹⁵ A virtual world presence differs from a website because most users visit social virtual worlds not to find information, but to socialize. Curious users of Second Life will usually visit a newly built island, but when they arrive, if other people are not there or if there isn’t evidence of a community, they will most likely not return. It isn’t a coincidence that

the most populated place in the library community is the reference desk located on Info International Island. Although there is high-quality content in the vicinity, most nights you will find librarians huddled around the purposefully quaint reference desk socializing with one another. In Second Life, it is people, not the content, that is king.

6. **In Second Life, content goes in, but it doesn't go out.** Currently there is no way for ordinary users to archive or preserve a Second Life presence. Second Life allows users to import content such as Photoshop files, 3ds Max animations and a range of other media types, including sound. Unfortunately, though, users cannot export any of their creations from Second Life. Regions within Second Life are limited to having 15,000 objects displayed at a time.¹⁶ Because of this limitation, entire areas are often deleted when regions are sold or are dismantled when a new exhibit needs to be created. For example, I have had sixteen full-scale projects built by my students over the last two years, but because of the limits applied to regions, I have been forced to delete student work after every semester. The students created extravagant 3-D buildings and user experiences, but all that remains are screen shots and videos captured from the computer screen.

In this report, my goal is to provide an understanding of the historical and practical applications of social virtual worlds. Chapter 2, "A Social History of Virtual Worlds," provides a concise history of virtual worlds with emphasis on the evolution of text-based game worlds into 3-D social virtual worlds. Chapter 4, "Pedagogical Applications of Second Life," focuses on actual uses of Second Life in several settings from K-12 through higher education. I discuss specific teaching strategies I have employed, including role-playing, digital storytelling, and community engagement.

In chapter 3, "Public Libraries in Second Life: Expanding Service to the Virtual Environment," Jane Stimpson, an MLIS student, provides an analysis of the current use of Second Life by public libraries. In chapter 5, "Barriers to Student Learning in Second Life," I discuss the technical and social barriers that I have uncovered through my experience teaching and learning in Second Life, as well as unique solutions used to overcome the barriers.

Notes

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