Focus
Second Life is the fastest-growing of a number of virtual worlds that have sprung up on the Internet. *News in Review* looks at this popular Web site, examining its origins and appeal to adults and teens alike. We also note the popularity of other virtual worlds, including game-based universes.

Quote
“Second Life is no more a game than the Web is a game. It’s a platform. This feels exactly like it felt when the Web was first coming out. I remember feeling the hair on the back of my neck standing up.” — John Lester, Linden Lab community and education manager, quoted in *The (Halifax) Chronicle Herald*, November 4, 2006

Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

In the beginning were the online games. The early Internet was quickly recognized as potentially the most important vehicle for personal communication ever developed. Almost as quickly, gamers realized that the Internet could bring together players from around the world to play online games. MUDs (multiuser dungeons)—text-based games for multiple players—rapidly developed popularity among more skilled computer users.

With the development of sophisticated computer graphics, online gaming further grew in popularity. Believable virtual worlds became more and more the norm. David Kushner, writing in *Technology Review* (April 2004), identified four reasons why this had happened. These included:
- the mainstreaming of instant messaging and e-mail
- increased use of broadband
- the speed and relative cheapness of computer processors
- 3-D capabilities

Even more than for online games, these developments made possible the development of online worlds like Second Life.

Second Life’s developers are always anxious to point out that it is something very different from an online game. Kushner’s description outlines that difference perfectly: “The key insight of the new virtual worlds is to allow people simply to share experiences with fellow cyber travellers, without forcing them to perform any particular tasks.”

Most of Second Life’s member-residents visit its virtual world primarily to communicate with old friends and to meet new ones. Second Life provides them with a setting—and the tools—to fully express their own personalities. It also gives them places to go and things to do—experiences that they can share with one another.

Philip Rosedale, CEO of Linden Lab, the developers of Second Life, sees this expression of personality as being of critical importance for residents of Second Life. “Remaking one’s identity,” he says (*Computer Graphics World*, July 2004), “is only the tip of the iceberg of what digital worlds can offer. We all share a tremendous passion to express ourselves and an inability in real life to do it as well as we would like. By creating an exceptionally plastic environment in which you can change everything from yourself to your home or your car or anything else in your environment, SL can be the closest thing to having someone else be able to see inside your head.”

Some do go to Second Life just to have fun. But many of its residents have found serious reasons to be there. “They form support groups for cancer survivors,” writes *The Economist* (September 30, 2006). “They rehearse responses to earthquakes and terrorist attacks. They build Buddhist retreats and meditate.” Politicians give interviews in Second Life, libraries offer their virtual services, and universities offer virtual courses.

There is also the opportunity to make real money. Residents who create in Second Life own their creations, and they determine what can be copied and modified. Huge numbers of these creations change hands every month for Linden dollars, and these Linden dollars are exchangeable for real currency.
There are more than 7,000 profitable businesses in Second Life.

Even more profitable is real estate development and speculation. At least one real estate developer, a Chinese woman named Anshe Chung, has become a real-world millionaire through her land development efforts in Second Life.

In December 2005, *Technology Review* asked Philip Rosedale how big Second Life could get. He responded: “Hardware and bandwidth would be big issues, but in theory, Second Life software could offer everyone on the Internet a 3-D experience. When we say Second Life is the next evolutionary step after the Web, we mean it.”

For Discussion

1. Is Rosedale’s statement about the future of the Web (“When we say Second Life is the next evolutionary step after the Web, we mean it.”) a reasonable one, or is he just blowing smoke? Explain your thinking.

2. According to *New Scientist* (May 20, 2006), “a third of Second Life players spend more time in the game than in the real world.” Are you surprised by this statistic? Would you describe it as worrisome? Why or why not?
VISITING SECOND LIFE’S VIRTUAL WORLD  

Video Review

Part I

1. What news agency, based in London, recently opened a virtual news bureau in Second Life?

2. What is the currency in Second Life called?

3. What is the approximate exchange rate between Second Life currency and the Canadian dollar?

4. What products does Alison Childs design for avatars?

5. What major athletic shoe corporations have virtual stores in Second Life?

6. Why does Truly Magnolia, Adrienne Arsenault’s avatar, become a “wary wanderer”?

7. Tim Guest says that Second Life has conquered “the two things that people say are constant in life.” What are they?

8. How do avatars talk in Second Life?

9. What is “Wheelies”?

10. Why does Simon Stevens especially love Second Life?

Part II

1. Carla Robinson points out that Second Life does have its critics, who argue that it encourages “people to avoid reality, rather than engage with it.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
2. Some of the “residents” (especially early residents) of Second Life deplore the presence of real-world commercial operations in their community. They argue that these will inevitably become a huge—and negative—influence in Second Life. Do you agree with their concerns?

3. The creators of Second Life have attempted to build a communal Web site with as few restrictions as possible on the virtual activities that take place there. As Adrienne Arsenault points out, however, there is crime in Second Life (and it actually seems to be on the increase). Should the creators intervene in any way to deal with this problem? If so, what measures might they take?
VISITING SECOND LIFE’S VIRTUAL WORLD

Origins: The Metaverse

There are times when science fiction writers make predictions that prove to be totally inaccurate. Consider, for example, novelist Arthur C. Clarke’s 1964 predictions that became part of the film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Clarke envisioned a U.S. space program that, by 2001, would have created permanent manned moon bases and be capable of sending manned flights to distant planets. Instead, since 1972 no human has walked on the surface of the moon, and manned space flight has been limited to Earth orbit.

Then there are predictions that are almost unnervingly accurate (To be fair to Clarke, it is important to note that many of his predictions have come true—including geostationary satellites.) Probably the one author most noted today for his vision is Neal Stephenson, author of many novels, including 1992’s Snow Crash.

The World of Snow Crash

Snow Crash is set in the United States in the early 21st century. It is not by any means accurate in its description of modern political developments. Stephenson’s U.S. is a nation in which the federal government has lost much of its authority, and most of the power is in the hands of private companies and organizations. The country is largely divided into small suburban enclaves, each with its own government. This is Stephenson’s Real World.

Co-existing with the Real World, however, is what he calls the Metaverse. This is a virtual-reality-based parallel world that Stephenson foresees as the likely evolution of the Internet.

Using a computer, anyone has access to the Metaverse through public access terminals set up throughout the real world. However, people who use these terminals are generally of a lower social status. Those with status and power use private terminals and portable portals. They are more sophisticated and have greater technical abilities than those who use public ones.

One way in which they show this sophistication is in the quality of their avatars. An avatar is the graphic representation of a person as he or she navigates the Metaverse. The visual quality of a sophisticate’s avatar—its virtual reality—is far superior to that of the average person.

One of the perks of status in the Metaverse is access to restricted areas denied to the average visitor. As in the Real World, only those of the highest status are admitted to some of the clubs and other social environments of the Metaverse.

The plot of Snow Crash is far too complex to summarize briefly. It involves a threat to both the Real World and the Metaverse by a “snow crash.” In the Real World, this is a powerful drug. In the Metaverse, it is a computer virus that threatens to destroy the entire fabric of virtual reality.

The novel’s main characters are Hiro Protagonist and Y.T. (whose name other characters often misunderstand as Whitey). Hiro is pizza deliverer for the Mafia. He is also a hacker who sometimes gathers and sells intel intelligence to the Central Intelligence Corporation (a privatized Central Intelligence Agency). He is offered but refuses the intel that turns out to be the
snow crash virus. Unfortunately, another character accepts and installs it and begins the process that could destroy the Metaverse. Hiro and Y.T.—a courier who uses a skateboard for her work—become partners in a race to keep this from happening.

Hiro does have an advantage. He was one of the original inhabitants of the universe and wrote some of its code. As you might have guessed, Hiro Protagonist is not his real name, but one he selected for his avatar. It is also perfectly descriptive of his role in the Metaverse and in Stephenson’s novel.

Influence
Its value as literature aside, Snow Crash has had a great deal of influence. It has been extremely popular among computer professionals (it certainly does not hurt that the hero is a computer insider), who have responded positively to the virtual world it portrays.

Although not the first to use the word in this context, Stephenson popularized the use of the Sanskrit word avatar to describe the virtual representation of a body online. It is now universally understood by computer users. Rather than one Metaverse, a number of metaverse-like worlds are now available to computer users. Many of their creators (including some who worked on Second Life) have acknowledged that their design owes a huge debt to Stephenson and Snow Crash. And Wikipedia states that one of the co-founders of Google Earth was inspired by the “Earth” software developed in the novel by the Central Intelligence Corporation.

To Consider
1. Does this brief outline of Snow Crash encourage you to read the novel? Explain.

2. What other novels about alternative worlds have you found interesting? Why?
VISITING SECOND LIFE’S VIRTUAL WORLD

The World of Second Life

From its very beginnings in 2002, Second Life has billed itself as something different—an online place, rather than an online game. While it often is referred to as a MMORPG, it is different from games like EverQuest and Asheron’s Call. “The key insight of the new virtual worlds” (including Second Life), wrote David Kushner in Technology Review, April 2004, “is to allow people simply to share experiences with fellow cyber travellers, without forcing them to perform particular tasks.” Or, as Time (November 18, 2002) wrote in an early review: “It’s about building things, meeting people, and expressing yourself.”

People

As this is being written (January 2007), Second Life is nearing three million registered users, 20 000-plus of whom are likely to be online at any one time. Each user is represented by an avatar, a virtual graphic representation that may take on a variety of shapes. Most of these avatars, however, are human in basic appearance.

When a user first registers with Second Life, he or she is presented with a small group of avatars from which to choose. As the new avatar wanders through Second Life it is immediately apparent to regulars that it is a “newbie.” So most new residents are eager to customize their appearance. This can be done in a number of ways. New clothing can be purchased. Changes can be made to facial features and to hairstyles. Skin can be changed. Wings can be added. Avatars can even be transformed into a totally new species.

New registrants also choose a new name by which they are known in Second Life. This preserves their anonymity in real life and serves as one more way in which residents enhance their experience as avatars.

Places

Everything in Second Life is created by its residents. Users can purchase property and build whatever they like on it; homes, nightclubs, businesses, theatres, and art galleries are only a few of the possibilities.

Land in Second Life is actually a representation of computer space. People who purchase land in Second Life are actually purchasing space on a computer; the look of the property they create in this space is totally up to them. In addition to the original price of the property, owners pay a monthly land-use fee to maintain it.

Second Life has several land speculators who purchase large parcels of land to develop and then sell to those who do not wish or have the skills to design and build their own homes. Entire communities are designed and built according to one theme—Victorian London is an example—and then sold to individual purchasers. Land speculation is the most profitable business in Second Life, because the world’s population is growing so fast. At least one such speculator is believed to have become a millionaire in the real world through such activities.

Things

Not just land is for sale. Every design created for Second Life remains the property of the person who designed it.
Thus, every creator can sell their creations to other users. Fashion is currently the most important business (after real estate) in Second Life. There are thousands of designers working with hair, clothing, and accessories. Top designers are making as much as $85 000 (real dollars!) from their sales in Second Life. “People go to their Second Life to work, to create incomes, and sometimes even replace their full-time livings,” says David Fleck, a former vice-president of the company that created Second Life (Toronto Star, December 7, 2006).

Real-world corporations and organizations are also getting involved. Examples include Wells Fargo, a U.S. banking company that has set up an entire island to use as an education centre for young people. The clothing company American Apparel has a boutique. Toyota and other car manufacturers sell virtual automobiles. The British Broadcasting Corporation has sponsored at least one virtual concert, with 6 000 residents in attendance.

Economy
Joining Second Life is free, but once you’re there, almost everything costs money. Transactions in Second Life take place in virtual cash, called Linden dollars (after Linden Lab, creators of Second Life). Linden dollars can be earned by selling items to or performing services for other players. They can also be exchanged for real dollars at an online currency exchange.

The value of the Linden dollar vs. the Canadian dollar has a varying exchange rate, but is roughly 300 Lindens to one Canadian dollar. Second Life has its own currency exchange, the LindeX.

November 2006 was the month when the number of registered users at Second Life reached one million. During that month there were $7.5-million worth of user-to-user transactions.

For Discussion
As Second Life approaches three million residents, its creators believe that its virtual world can support unlimited future growth. Along with growth, however, problems with crime and vice have become far more common. As more and more money pours into Second Life, are the threats from undesirable inhabitants likely to become even more significant? Explain fully.
Second Life is a world where pretty much anything goes. The developers have handed Second Life to its residents, permitting them to do almost anything they desire. As a result, the virtual world, like the real world, has places where there is lots of crime, vice, and casual sex.

Developers also recognized that Second Life virtual reality has great appeal to young people. The opportunity to go online, meet, and chat with old and new friends and to explore a landscape of almost limitless possibilities is very appealing.

To provide access for teens to Second Life, but to eliminate some of the “rougther” areas, Teen Second Life was developed. Teen Second Life has all the tools and features of the Second Life virtual world but is restricted to teens 13-17 years of age. Second Life and Teen Second Life are totally separate worlds, and no travel or communication is permitted between them.

The Web site (http://teen.secondlife.com) states the basic rules: “Only teens between the ages of 13 and 17 are allowed in (there is a separate version of Second Life for adults) so other than Linden Lab’s staff, Linden Liaisons, who are there to make Teen Second Life a safe and pleasant place to be, teens will interact with other teens their own age. Occasionally we may bring in teachers for special educational projects as well. When that happens we will always let residents know who they are and what type of project they’re working on.”

As in the original version of Second Life, teens create their own avatars to travel for them in the virtual universe. They can customize these in a variety of ways—basic appearance, hairstyles, tattoos, clothing, and custom gestures.

Communication Is the Key
Communication with other residents is the key activity in Teen Second Life. While in Second Life, users can communicate with any other residents within listening range. They can have private conversations with any other resident using instant messaging. They can also communicate via e-mail with friends who are not online. Residents can even send postcards—screenshots from Second Life—to friends via e-mail.

Teens can establish a “friendship” with other residents. Whenever they log in, users will be notified if the friend is also in Second Life. Residents are encouraged to form groups with their friends to collaborate on group projects and activities. There are also several ongoing forums in which Teen Second Life residents can participate, including general community discussions and special tutorials.

Full Participants
Teen Second Life residents can participate as completely as they wish to in the Second Life experience. The basic account is free. It gives residents access to all events and permits them to shop and to build objects and structures. Keen participants can use scripting to control the behaviour of their avatars (and of the objects they build). Tutorials on the Linden Script Language (LSL) are regularly available in Teen Second Life.

Teen entrepreneurs retain ownership of any of their virtual creations in Teen Second Life.
Second Life and can sell them to or trade them with other residents. Teen Second Lifers who acquire premium accounts (a monthly fee is charged) may also become landholders and purchase land in Teen Second Life. Land ownership gives residents a place to put their virtual creations and the possibility of hosting events or opening businesses. Parcels of land sell for a variety of prices, depending on size and location. There is also a monthly land-use fee charged for parcels of land larger than those permitted by the premium account.

**Outside Interest**

It was not long after its development that the original Second Life attracted the attention of a number of real-world businesses and organizations. Teen Second Life is also attracting a great deal of real-world attention—especially from educators.

One of the earliest organizations to get involved was Global Kids, a non-profit organization from New York that teaches leadership, citizenship, and learning skills to city kids. One of their initiatives was a summer camp on their private island that brought together participants from three countries to learn about global issues like the genocide in Darfur.

In another initiative, a corporation involved in creating library technologies and two U.S. public library systems have created a virtual library for teens in Teen Second Life. Called the Eye4You Alliance, its goal is “to create an interactive and informative space for young adults within the Teen Second Life virtual world and to collaborate with other educators who serve youth and are already present in Teen Second Life and in real life” (http://infoisland.org/2007/01/20/sirs-dynix-sponsors-alliance-library-second-life-library-and-teen-second-life-library/).

**For Discussion**

Teen Second Life has been very popular, and successful in recruiting new residents to its environment. To date, its biggest impact is as a place where teens can interact socially without adult interference. How do you feel it will likely develop in the future? Will the presence of “outside” organizations like Global Kids and Eye4You have a major influence? Outline your thoughts in detail.
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Other Virtual Worlds

Second Life is neither the first nor the only virtual world on the Web. There are many others catering to different interests and age groups. Here are descriptions of a few others.

**MMORPGs**

In a class by themselves are the MMORPGs (pronounced “morepegs”) the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. MMORPGs developed from earlier games played online by groups of players, but with a text-based environment. MMORPGs provide users with an online virtual world in which to interact with other players in a fantasy adventure. The world continues to exist and to evolve even when players are away from the game.

MMORPGs are hugely popular with players around the world. According to Wikipedia, in 2006 more than 15 million players participated in them. It is expected that revenues from the games will reach US$1-billion by 2009 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMORPG).

MMORPGs differ from environments like Second Life in that there are always tasks to accomplish, and characters develop systematically (reaching different levels and/or winning experience points). What MMORPGs share with Second Life is the need for characters to interact—that is, to work together to accomplish goals.

There are many different MMORPGs; Wikipedia’s article describes a wide range of free and paid games. The most successful of them is World of Warcraft (WoW), developed by Blizzard Entertainment (www.worldofwarcraft.com). WoW is believed to have more than 50 per cent of the overall market. Also very popular is Sony’s EverQuest II.

**Habbo Hotel (www.habbo.ca)**

Like Teen Second Life, Habbo is a virtual community designed for residents 13 and older. The community is the Habbo Hotel, and residents—the Habbos—are the avatars that live there. Habbos can communicate with friends, play games, and design their own hotel rooms. Membership is free, but Habbo credits (bought with real money) are required to obtain furniture and play many games. For a monthly fee, residents may also join an exclusive Habbo Club that gives them special privileges.

**Whyville (www.whyville.net)**

Whyville is a site designed for both teens and pre-teens, 1.7 million of whom “come from all over to learn, create, and have fun together. Whyville is their world. Whyville has places to go, things to do, and of course, people to see. Whyville has its own newspaper, its own Senators, its own beach, museum, City Hall and town square, its own suburbia, and even its own economy—citizens earn ‘clams’ by playing educational games.” Membership is free. Members under 13 who join the site must obtain their parents’ permission. Whyville uses a language filter and chat log monitoring to ensure appropriate language is used in communication between members.

**There (www.there.com)**

Among non-game-based virtual worlds, There is probably Second Life’s biggest rival. In many ways There is very similar to Second Life. Basic member-
Residents are represented by avatars members create and modify. They spend the majority of their time communicating with friends and making new acquaintances. Members can join a variety of interest groups or create new ones.

There has a vast landscape to explore, on foot or in virtual vehicles. Members may also rent zones they can customize for various activities, or houses they can furnish in any way they desire. “Porta-zones” are also available and can be removed from There when not being used—or relocated to a different area in There’s virtual world.

As in Second Life, members may sell their virtual creations to other residents. The currency used is the Therebuck. One significant difference from Second Life is that There’s creators must approve all new creations by residents before they are introduced for sale.

**Entropia Universe (www.entropiauniverse.com)**

Of all the online virtual worlds, Entropia Universe is the one that most promotes itself for having a “Real Cash Economy.” Every virtual item that players acquire in Entropia has a real cash value and can be redeemed for real cash. There is a fixed exchange rate of 10 PED (Project Entropia Dollars) to US$1.

Entropia combines features of MMORPGs and Second Life. Entropia Universe has more of a game format than Second Life or There. Action takes place far in the future on a planet called Calypso. Calypso is rough and unsettled, ripe for development by its virtual colonizers.

Free membership is available, with new residents receiving one orange jumpsuit for their avatar. Without money, however, players are very restricted in their activities. The developers make very clear the role that money plays in this universe:

“No funds can easily be deposited and exchanged for PEDs, the currency that allows participants to acquire virtual land and equipment to develop their virtual character (avatar) inside the Entropia Universe. The outposts, cities, and auctions on the planet Calypso are busy trading hubs where tools, weapons, minerals, and a multitude of other items are bought and sold by adventuring pioneers. The wide range of professions available to colonists allows hairdressers, crafters, and store owners to find a spot on the bustling frontier. Skills and resources make lively trade on Calypso. All your economic data is securely contained in your own personal account, and withdrawals of accumulated PED can easily be made into your own currency” (www.entropiauniverse.com/en/real/money.html).

While some players have indeed made money in the Entropia Universe, it is not unusual for others to exchange $100-$200 per month in real dollars for PEDs to enhance their participation in the game.

**For Discussion**

Real money seems to be playing an increasingly important role in virtual worlds. Who are likely to be the real beneficiaries from this trend? What individuals are likely to be unable to participate fully if this trend continues? Does this trend affect your desire or ability to participate?
Virtual worlds give us the opportunity to transform ourselves into totally different persons from who we are in real life. Designing an avatar is an opportunity to highlight those things one really likes about oneself. It is also an opportunity to eliminate or transform those features one feels one could well do without.

Who would you be in a virtual world like Second Life? Would your avatar resemble the real you or be someone completely different?

Creating a new persona for online appearances has been going on for years, especially among young people. According to Andrew Walmsley (Marketing, September 6, 2006), “... there are people who act differently online and there are people who have completely different lives online to their ‘real’ world lives. This is an increasingly pervasive trend—a survey in 2001 reported that 24 per cent of teenagers in chat rooms said they had pretended to be someone else. A Canadian survey in 2005 claimed 60 per cent of students pretended to be someone else online.”

Write a brief description (two or three paragraphs) of the avatar you would create for yourself in Second Life. Include the following information:

- Your new name
- A physical description, including physical appearance, clothing, and any special enhancements, such as wings or antennae.
- Any special powers—flight, x-ray vision, etc.—that your avatar would enjoy in its virtual world. Include a brief explanation of why you feel these special powers would be important.

You may also include an illustration with your work.

Notes: