

'Residents' in it for the freedom, money, fun

By Kathryn Masterson
RedEye

LOCAL PLAYERS

Second Life has more than a million residents living in its virtual world, doing a range of activities that mirror what people do in the actual world every day. They're teaching, buying and selling things, making friends, going to clubs and even falling in love. Here's what some Chicagoans are doing there.

THE SOCIALIZER

Columbia College freshman Sheena Roque comes to Second Life strictly for fun. She hangs out with a group of friends she met in the game, dresses her avatar like a Barbie in hundreds of different outfits and hairstyles, and spends time in the virtual world with her real-life boyfriend.

"I think of it as one big chat



Columbia College student Sheena Roque lives a Second Life just for fun, but she's thinking of cutting back.

room, but with avatars," said Roque, who is 19 and lives with her parents in Skokie.

Roque is trying to cut back on the time she spends in Second Life, though. This summer, her virtual life started to surpass her real one, she said. She and her boyfriend played the game for hours a day.

"It really is what it's called—Second Life," Roque said. "It became part of our daily routine to be in this game."

The game ate up her money too. Every two weeks, she would put in \$33, money she spent on virtual outfits, hairstyles and tattoos. For a while she was paying money to rent a home in Second Life.

And then there was the drama. She and her real-life boyfriend, Tony, both found relationships in Second Life (a common occurrence in the game, which some SL players claim has broken up real relationships) but found it was getting too real. They and their SL partners were starting to have real-life feelings, and it almost broke up the real relationship, she said.

"We didn't like seeing our real-life person with another person, even though it isn't real," she said.

To avoid romantic complications, they've cut down on extra romances and are now partnered up in Second Life. But recently they've been thinking of getting out of Second Life altogether and spending more time going out and doing things in



Chicago graphic designer Scott McMillin's alter ego is Nicola Escher (right), a clothing designer who sells to avatars.

Chicago.

"Even though you can do things in-game, it's not like you're really doing them," Roque said. "And you're sitting for so long, it's not even good for you."

She says her online friends have remarked on her time away from the game, asking her, "What are you trying to do, get a real life?"

Her answer: "Yes, I am."

THE DESIGNER

Chicago graphic designer Scott McMillin makes real money in the virtual world.

In Second Life, McMillin is Nicola Escher, a clothing designer who sells period clothes (Arabian princess outfits from the Ottoman Empire and cabaret dancer clothes from 1920s and 1930s Berlin) for avatars.

Prices range from 250 Lindens for a piece of lingerie from his



Girl Kultur brand to 1,000 Lindens for a complete belly dancing outfit from his Sultana line. (Lindens are Second Life's currency and can be traded for U.S. dollars at online currency exchanges. The exchange rate as of Sunday was 257 Lindens to \$1.)

He says he makes \$500 to \$1,000 a month in real money selling his virtual creations.

"It's all about enhancing your experience [in Second Life]," McMillin said. If someone buys an outfit for her avatar and that outfit starts a conversation with someone else in Second Life or helps an avatar fit into a social situation, that purchase has value.

"It's not as crazy as it sounds initially, buying virtual clothing you can't touch," he says.

McMillin does most of his SL design work in Photoshop and doesn't spend much time "in-

world" as he did when he first joined in 2003. Now he goes in about once a week so Nicola (he picked a female avatar instead of a male almost on a whim) can work in her clothing store.

"I don't go in to socialize with people ... for me, it really is a business now," said McMillin, who lives with his real-life wife in Ravenswood.

Second Life is not the main source of income for McMillin. Focusing all his effort on a virtual world he doesn't control feels too risky. "I don't want to have my livelihood based on something that could go away tomorrow," he said.

THE INSTRUCTOR

Dan Zellner wants to teach theater in Second Life, and he's spending time in both the virtual world and the real world trying to figure out the best way to accomplish that.

In real life, Zellner works as a multimedia specialist at Northwestern University, and he's doing research into the academic possibilities of Second Life, an area many universities are beginning to explore.

"I'm not a gamer," Zellner said. "What I like about this is it's free and open. You're not following a certain script. You're free to do what you want to do."

Zellner, who runs his own multimedia improv company called Studio Z, is helping build a theater on the Second Life campus of the NMC, which in real life is the New Media Consortium, a group of universities that focuses on new media. He's currently working with people at the University of Georgia and

Penn State to put together a Second Life workshop in Commedia dell'Arte, a style of Italian comedy using masks.

The benefit of building a theater or doing theatrical collaborations in a virtual world is that the limits of time, money and geography don't apply, Zellner said.

On the other side, avatars don't have the range of expressions that humans do (plus the game can take a long time to load). And watching a production on a computer screen is not the same as watching it live.

Zellner knows there are challenges to trying to teach acting and improv in a virtual environment, and trying to find solutions is part of the fun.

"There's losses and gains," Zellner said. "It's just a different experience."

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Northwestern University multimedia specialist Dan Zellner is looking into the academic possibilities of Second Life.

VIRTUAL: Population is growing 30% per month

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

period over the past weekend. Entrepreneurs with virtual shops earn real money designing software, clothes and buildings for Second Life clients.

Joining Second Life is free, though the cost of building objects and buying land varies. A small, 16-acre island will set entrepreneurs back \$1,250 in U.S. dollars, plus a monthly maintenance fee of \$195. Large islands run \$5,000, plus \$780 monthly, though more affordable plans exist for inland lots.

The population of registered residents is growing by 30 percent a month.

"Second Life looks like the statistical average of all our dreams," says Rosedale, 38, an intense but soft-speaking San Diego native.

"In-world," as they say here, he's "Philip Linden," an urban cowboy punk. In real life, he's an entrepreneur who has attracted some of the biggest names in the online world as investors.

"But the thing that's so compelling about Second Life: There are no gods," he says.

Attracting major players

In the past few months, companies such as Sony BMG, Nissan and Adidas/Reebok have rushed to establish corporate beachheads on Second Life, founded in 2003. This fall, Harvard Law School offered a class taught partially on its virtual campus in Second Life (called Berkman Island), and Reuters news service assigned a full-time reporter to cover Second Life.

Wes Keltner, president and chief executive of The Ad Option, helped American Apparel set up its own island and is designing a virtual version of New York's Times Square.

"Linden Lab gave people a sandbox to play in and said, 'Make something cool,'" Keltner says. "Science fiction is now."

The implications of interactive worlds such as Second Life reach beyond the Internet. Residents can make money and retain intellectual property rights to their creations, as long as they adhere to user agreements.

"For us, it's a whole new medium," says Jeff Yapp, executive vice president of MTV Networks' Music Group.

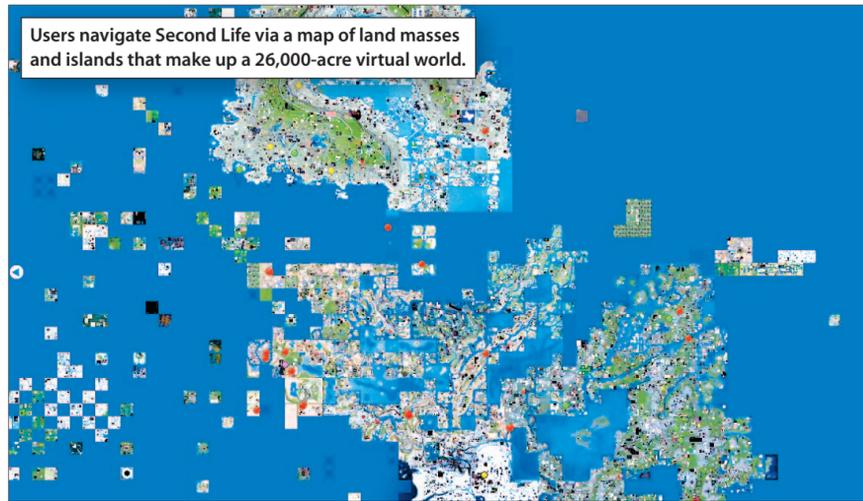
In September, MTV launched its own Virtual Laguna Beach, a sandy 3-D space akin to Second Life and Sims Online, based on its popular "Laguna Beach" TV series.

But Second Life isn't TV, nor is it a video game, says Rosedale. Unlike video games, there is no singular objective, no princesses in distress, no alien bad guys to slaughter wholesale.

Lori Bell, 45, a librarian in East Peoria, Ill., works at the in-world Alliance Second Life Li-

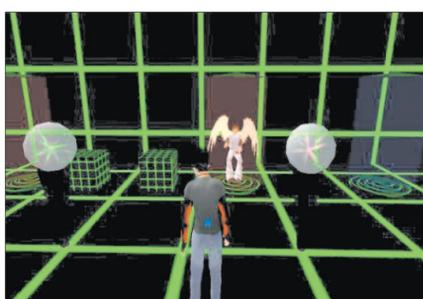
A look inside Second Life

In the Second Life virtual world, users are represented by avatars (animated alter egos) and interact in a variety of settings designed to attract those with common interests.



In this screen shot from Second Life, reporter Robert K. Elder's avatar is shown at a site called Better World, a hub for political activists.

Source: Linden Lab



An area named Shinda, inspired in appearance by the movie "The Matrix," is a place for residents to socialize and play games.

Chicago Tribune



Second Life is taking up ever-increasing server space. Servers are in a protective enclosure at 365 Main Inc. in San Francisco.

Photo for the Tribune by John Lee

brary on Info Island. She calls it "an opportunity to see things like Dublin, an ancient Egyptian area, a 19th Century simulation, museums and things you would never get to see in your real life. [It's] a place for boundless creativity and learning."

Tracy Hughes, 38, a pharmacist's assistant living near Birmingham, England, discovered Second Life through a friend on MySpace six weeks ago. She's a frequent visitor to Duran Duran's virtual mansion, where the British band hosts a scavenger hunt.

"I've made so many friends, and just like in real life, I love to see and chat with them. In fact, they are as important as the friends I have outside of Second Life," Hughes says. "We go dancing and to art galleries, to parks and to each others' houses."

And she says her money goes further.

"In fact, I'm saving so much money in real life because I get the satisfaction of spending in Second Life and it costs almost nothing," she says.

As landlord and currency exchange, Linden Lab gets a small part of that "almost nothing," multiplied exponentially.

Business, space keeps growing

Second Life is taking up ever-expanding server space, housed at 365 Main Inc., a little more than a mile south of Linden. Rosedale calls it "the big mountain."

Behind bullet-resistant glass, on an earthquake-proof foundation, Linden's servers spit out hot air and whir a low musical hum — the sound of Second Life growing.

"It sounds like money," says Kevin Shanahan, vice president of sales for 365 Main.

Because Linden Lab is a pri-

vately held company—investors include eBay co-founder Pierre Omidyar and Amazon founder Jeffrey Bezos—it does not release profit figures. But Rosedale will say this much: "We're very close to profitable. The business itself, on an operating basis, is very profitable. We're doing fine. We're not going to need different revenue streams to grow and be a very big company."

With its huge monthly population boom, Second Life could reach the tipping point of a full-blown cultural phenomenon, though skeptics offer caution.

"It's an online space that's relatively easy to understand and use, and that has a richness to it that has been lacking in other similar attempts before it," says Steve Jones, professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "On the other hand, I suspect ... that there will be a Third Life at some point, if you will, that will build on what Second Life has done. It may be that Second Life's creators will see to that evolution themselves."

Rosedale remains philosophical about his company's future.

"If we're remembered someday as the company that started this all, I think the thing that would be cool, that would feel rewarding, was just to feel that we made it happen a few years earlier than it otherwise would have," he says.

"The idea of simulating the world has always, to me, just been completely inevitable."

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FAMOUS PLAYERS

Social life keeps residents, and even celebrities, signed on

SAN FRANCISCO — If you build it, they will come — but only if you entertain them.

Special events, parties and sales represent an integral part of Second Life's social culture.

Musician Ben Folds recently held a CD release party in-world. Suzanne Vega played a few songs and author Kurt Vonnegut talked about his latest book, "A Man Without a Country."

The "Slaughter-house-Five" author even had his own avatar, complete with a bushy digital mustache. A green wizard and a few winged creatures, among others, attended the interview.

When asked for his view on Second Life, Vonnegut said: "It's actually possible to get a better life for individuals. I'm frequently an enemy of new technology, but I love cell phones. ... I'm up for anything that makes people happier."

However, reflecting on that August interview, Vonnegut told the Tribune that he never saw his avatar, and "it was just another interview. I'm not full of gratitude for all sorts of things, so I just found it silly. But I find so much silly; I'm 84 years old."

Folds' experience was much different.

"It started off as just another

'What it means to me is freedom. The rules aren't written yet.'

Musician Ben Folds, who has a rock star 'avatar' on Second Life

stop on the promo trail, really," Folds said. "I hadn't done it before. ... It was sort of interesting once we got into it, but it was still kind of confined and boring, because of the way I was conducting it."

So, Folds acted like a rock star. His avatar guzzled beer, took off his shirt, then jumped into the audience and attacked fans with a "Star Wars"-style light saber. Crimes against break dancing also were committed.

"We're finding all these cool ways to interact with other people," Folds said. "Imagine if you couldn't use your legs or something, I think some people would really dig that."

He continued: "What it means to me is freedom. The rules aren't written yet. The earth, the land, has been pioneered, but there are still new ideas. It's one of those Web sites that ... are poised to reshape the Internet."

—Robert K. Elder

INFLUENCING TECHNOLOGY

Authors foresee future as fact catches up with fiction

SAN FRANCISCO—Perhaps it's fitting that Linden Lab's office is on Green Street, just steps from the spot where Philo Farnsworth transmitted the first electronic television signal in 1927.

Like Farnsworth's achievement, Linden Lab's virtual Second Life stems from converging technologies—as well as converging ideas from an entire genre of speculative fiction.

The popularity of virtual worlds such as There.com and Second Life represents the present catching up with science fiction.

"There's a long history of science fiction literature influencing technology projects," wrote author Neal Stephenson in a rare e-mail interview. "It's nice when it happens, because it suggests that the vision described in the book made sense, at some level, to engineers."

In 1899, H.G. Wells wrote about air conditioning and video recorders in "When the Sleeper Wakes" long before they were invented, and Robert Heinlein described a waterbed in 1961's "Stranger in a Strange Land" — seven years before the

real thing debuted.

Authors such as William Gibson ("Neuromancer") and Vernor Vinge ("True Names") pioneered writing about cyberspace and its possibilities, but Stephenson's 1992 novel "Snow Crash" provides the clearest vision for technology like Second Life.

In that book, Stephenson's characters interact in the "Metaverse" (also used as a slang synonym for Second Life), a virtual reality world much like Linden Lab's creation. Residents built a few Second Life islands modeled after scenes from "Snow Crash."

Stephenson said he's never used Second Life and has requested that "Snow Crash" site builders make clear that he has no affiliation with the world.

"I have nothing negative to say about it," Stephenson said. "There are lots of unread books on my shelves and many interesting parts of the real world I haven't visited yet. Every hour I spend in a virtual reality is an hour I'm not spending reading Dickens or visiting Tuscany."

—Robert K. Elder