

## WTF is Second Life?

By Peter J. Darchuk

I'm not a gamer. Nor am I much of a virtual reality enthusiast. In fact, for me the phrase "virtual reality" still conjures up images of lame high school parties where trippers-in-training would try to line up Dark Side of the Moon with even lamer CGI movies featuring crudely shaped floating humans gliding over vector-graphic landscapes with shiny glowing orbs.

So you can imagine my hesitation in submerging myself within "a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents." Don't get me wrong, I'm a curious lad, but I think I naturally bend toward a tactile experience. I grew up watching The Muppet Show for crab's sake – that was my virtual reality.

But I'm not here to bag on virtuality, I'm here to explore it. To try to understand it. To contextualize this virtual experience known as Second Life textually and distribute that parsed data to the info-hungry masses via the handheld portable device you find yourself holding right now (AKA a zine). Toot sweet, let's roll!

First things first – I download the program from [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com). Easy. Next, pick a name. All right, Nutter VanDyke it is. Pick an avatar. Hmmmm, I guess I'll just be this weird fox or bunny or whatever the hell it is. What can I say, the puffy tail pleases me – besides, these other characters are just a little too Dance Dance Revolution for my liking.

Click click tick tick boom! There I am in Second Life, standing amidst a handful of other dazed lads, lasses and bunny-foxes on what feels very much like a country club golf course. I hear music – calm and serene and totally creepy. Welcome to "Orientation Island." It feels like an afterlife to me. The kind of place they might send you after stripping you of your memory, your knowledge, your sense of self – of time and place and space, and your relation to it all. In that sense I guess it's really more like being reborn. It's all new. Time to learn. Baby steps in the village.

There are little signs all over this island that tell you how to do things. I should be paying closer attention to them, but I'm just too impatient. I want something to happen. I find myself next to another SL newbie and try to talk to her. I ask her if I'm a fox or a bunny or what, but she doesn't respond. Hey, this is just like real life! Ugh.

I learn to fly – just me and my puffy tail, drifting over the island – and it's actually quite pleasant. Maybe this isn't so far-fetched. Maybe I could buy a condo here. Settle down. Build a family. Sell insurance.

I flee the island to traverse the SL universe. I end up at Calleta's Hobo Railroad. This place is weird. It's like some dark apocalyptic bizarro world where dirty vagrants quench cyber hunger with virtual baked beans and quip in leet speak. I'm out. That's the beauty of SL – don't like it, change the channel.

But what's really going on in here? I turned to SL veteran Laura Crawford, AKA Jane Bertrand (or Johnny Sparkle, depending on her mood). Laura is the founder of Slang Media, a group of experience design creatives that help brands and entertainment properties find meaningful engagements in the 3-D virtual world.

Peter Darchuk: Help me out here – what are the practical applications of SL? 'Cause I'm just running around in there with my puffy tail looking for naked people.

Laura Crawford: The SL platform levels the playing field. Anyone anywhere can be a developer, a builder, a vendor or a club owner. This is a great place to create a working virtual model of a real world business – and yet it really never has to leave the virtual realm. But it's real – real commerce, real services, real money.

PD: Is this really the future of the 3-D internet?

LC: It's certainly the beginning of a new way of interaction, of commerce and engagement. I'm looking forward to the 3-D internet combining with a MySpace-esque social network. For example, I have an apartment in my 3-D multiverse, my friends come over via avatar representation, and I am able to share my playlists, we hang out, chat, when I'm not there they can post messages to me, etc.

PD: What are the social ramifications of living in a virtual world? Are we all just going to be pasty, palsied freaks holed up in our "First Life" boxes?

LC: SL and other virtual worlds aren't the beginning of the end of face-to-face social interaction as I believe some might suspect. I think some might be afraid that we will hide behind our avatar-selves and never leave the house, creating a new generation of couch potatoes that opponents of the television could never have even fathomed. But I think this is far from the truth. I have a personal investment in my avatar – this 3-D virtual being is an extension of myself, therefore I am extending myself into this new world and meeting people from all over. I am engaging, chatting, building and learning in ways that were not possible before. True, SL does take time – I will get sucked in for hours at on end. But I'd argue that the social interactions in SL far surpass those of a traditional "shoot-em-up" game. And while SL inhabitants may be spending hours behind the computer, they are collectively building something – creating their own values, social networks and entrepreneurial businesses.

PD: Let's talk about sex in SL. You ever swing-a-ling with Taco VanTrowsers or Dante Spumante?

LC: When I first joined SL, I joined as Johnny Sparkle. Johnny is my avatar that allows me to be completely anonymous and bold. Jane Bertrand, my second avatar who came months later, is the more professional extension of myself. I would be lying if I said I never explored sexual content in SL – of course Johnny hit on a pole dancer or two. This was great fun as a newbie – dangerous, naughty and anonymous – but when I realized the sexy pole dancer was a 40-something year old man in Oklahoma, I physically blushed and logged off. It's Johnny whom I send in to explore the "mature content" of SL. Jane would never ever – and I mean never, ever – go there. I think it's an interesting comment on persona and anonymity and how we imbue a sense of self and sexuality in these characters – allowing certain freedoms based on these personas. So, you can have a fun sexy romp in SL of course, but that is not what this world is about. It's just like the Internet really. The sexual content is out there, but it's not why you use it.

PD: Why are people so into this?

LC: Linden Lab has created a platform for a virtual world and opened it up so that it is entirely created by its inhabitants. People engaging in SL are stakeholders in this virtual world. They are making it what they want it to be and they have all the creative and development tools to do so. Anyone anywhere can make what they want, do what they want, and possibly even make a living at it – buying, selling and trading virtual goods actually has value...and it's an entertaining, creative, bold new world. Why not?

To explore this bold new world yourself, go to [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com).