

New World Notes

Wagner James Au reports first-hand from Second Life



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Friday, May 12, 2006

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RETURN TO DARFUR



Cobbling together a case for metaverse as social change tool...

Can a virtual world change the real one? [Ethan Zuckerman](#) of Harvard Law School [Berkman Center](#) has [an extensive post](#) stemming from a short presentation I gave at [the Metaverse Roadmap](#) conference we attended last weekend. That Saturday I gave the summary of a Roadmap breakout session, where a group of geekishly inclined media folks described our vision for [the state of online worlds in 2016](#). Working with their notes and some of my own, we envisioned a future where the metaverse was the new operating system, an equal contributor to popular culture and an integral element in the world economy, and so entirely woven into the Internet that it would depict everything we knew about the physical world as a topographic map of interactive 3D data. This last point was perhaps the most optimistic, because I argued, the metaverse would create total transparency across the globe and be informed on the health of the planet and its peoples. There was [a virtual Car Darfur](#) in Second Life now, I mentioned by example; it's primarily a resource to raise awareness of the ongoing genocide in Sudan. Ten years from now, I suggest places like that could easily incorporate real world data in real time.

Ethan (brilliant in a brusque-but-avuncular sort of way) took great exception to my last point. Or in his words, "I lost it."

Later on, in a post that's both thoughtful and gracefully forceful, he explains i



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strength of his reaction:

The reason Second Life bugs me is not the fact that it slows my computer to a crawl, that most of my fellow characters are impossibly thin girls with overinflated breasts, or that most of the activity of the world seems to rotate around real estate and sex. (It reminds me of Reagan's America, without the cocaine.) Not the cyberutopianism.

I love the Reagan line, but considering the popularity of [virtual magic mushrooms](#) and [artificial life pot plants](#), not to mention the hot tubs or rampant free love, I say Second Life usually seems more like Jerry Brown's California. But that's ju

But his point about cyberutopianism is well-taken, especially coming as it does from a man who's been to real life refugee camps in Africa (he told me later), and a human rights activist who's been exasperated at the difficulty to get *any* first-hand data on Darfur-- let alone create an accurate simulation of a camp inside it. (By the record, when I made this point, I was thinking of how [satellite imagery of Darfur's razed villages](#) could be depicted in the metaverse, even when first-hand reporting was not possible, but it's my fault for not spelling that out.) In any case, Ethan's point wasn't to denigrate the effort that went into creating SL's Camp Darfur, or [the superheroes](#) who now protect it against griefers-- it's to wonder how important such an installation is in the hierarchy of the here and now, against the ongoing genocide:

The web, now twelve years old, will help draw attention to people affected by these situations, improve reporting and give us voices from people on the ground, though we'll still need professional journalists, real-world NGOs and, possibly, military forces to intervene in situations like Darfur. It's not that the metaverse doesn't matter. It's just not a very high priority yet.

And that point is well-taken, too, though it does make you wonder what role it is that those who aren't in an NGO or the Marine Expeditionary Force can play. (Beyond contacting their Congresspeople and the media, and seeking other traditional avenues of redress.) Still, I agree that the metaverse as a tool for social change should be on a ways on the priority list-- perhaps on par with starting a website that promotes genocide awareness. (Even if Camp Darfur attracted just five visitors every hour, it'd be on a parity with most political blogs, which are lucky to attract over a thousand unique visitors per week.)

But while it's surely not a high priority, I do want to make the case that virtual worlds like Second Life should at least be seen as a *medium* priority for effecting social and political progress-- certainly in the next few years. A couple rough in-development arguments for that after the break.

[THE YEAR IN NWN:
MARVELS, WONDERS, AND
FANTASTIC DEVICES](#)

[THE YEAR IN NWN:
CREATING CONFLICT](#)

[ALL SIMS CONSIDERED](#)

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[The New World Notes](#)

[Travel Guide \(A personal
selection of great sites in
SL\)](#)

[SL Machinima \(Index of
links\)](#)

[Gaming the System \(Index
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links\)](#)

[Social Structures, Social
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[Sex and Romance \(Index of
links\)](#)

[The Uncanny Valley Expo
\(All the entries\)](#)

[New World Group Directory](#)

[The Trouble with Two
Million \(Tateru Nino counts
the cost of reaching that
number of accounts\)](#)

[Copying a Controversy \(A 3D
Napster creates a brief
mini-IP firestorm\)](#)

[Not the First Time \(Culture
clashing with corporate co-
option\)](#)

[Outsourcing the Metaverse
\(From Saigon to SL\)](#)

[Need 4 Nissan? \(How a
young car lover beat an
automotive conglomerate in
Second Life\)](#)



Second Life as Immersive Blogging: At the moment, the SL user base of 215, approaches the popularity of top political blogs; by the end of this year, it'll be close to half a million users. Of course, unlike a blog, most Residents aren't in-world to engage in politics. But the unique user-creation tools of SL make 3D blogging possible-- quickly responding to the day's events with images, a video, and builds, in a way that can be experienced by other Residents in the space. We saw this perhaps most vividly [during the Katrina disaster last year](#), Residents shared photographs from New Orleans and other ravaged areas, and created memorial candles for the victims, some of whom were SL members directly hit by the storm. I call this "immersive blogging", borrowing the first term from the world of VR research and game development, to capture the quality of being surrounded by experience in a way that shifts the experience from passive witness to embodied participant. I'm not an academic, and the folks at [Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab](#) are the ones to best speak on the phenomenon, but as a reporter and a participant myself, it's my sense that this shifting effect is genuine. See yourself as an avatar, see the graphical 3D world around you as a true space and see the people you're interacting with as people you know, and can have a moral emotional investment in. Which leads to my second argument:

Embodied Interaction becomes Active Engagement: Unlike blogging and other Net-based interaction, the quality of a virtual world "punctures the fourth wall" by removing the barrier between medium and participant, and translates into a willingness to engage that mediums before it do not usually encourage. Again, I'm not an academic, so this is my inference based on anecdote. I saw this phenomenon during Katrina, when Residents who didn't know them personally before [took risks and made significant sacrifices](#) to help the storm's refugees. More recently, I reported on how roleplaying heroes quickly morphed into something more real, in [the effort to protect Camp Darfur](#). As Ethan says in his post, it's a lot easier to guard a virtual refugee camp, than shield the real camps. But I think that misses another point: where there were once gamers, there are now nascent activists, struggling to do something, anything, on an issue that many hadn't previously given much thought.

[Find Fur \(An informal census of Furies\)](#)

[The Meaning of a Million \(Tateru Nino explains what was gained-- and what was lost-- in the population explosion\)](#)

[The Mixed Success of Mixed Reality \(How corporate-sponsored SL sites fall short\)](#)

[The Second Life of Chris Anderson \(The Long Tail reaches the metaverse\)](#)

[The Uncanny Valley Expo \(All the entries\)](#)

[Wired Outtakes: Burning Life \(Virtual bacchanal in high-res\)](#)

[Really Simple Second Life \(Streaming RSS feeds in-world\)](#)

[Wired Outtakes: Samurai Island \(Melee combat in high-res\)](#)

[Creating Peace \(A Nobel nominee educates in-world\)](#)

[Sex and the Singularity \(An omniseual harlot explains transhumanism\)](#)

[Trademarking Utopia \(Experiments in social democracy-- and DMCA\)](#)

[Political Vote \(Debating the value of real world politicians in SL\)](#)

[Hacking Up a Storm \(Security breach as good PR\)](#)

[Fashion Victim \(The perils of SL's most competitive](#)

These cases are small and not necessarily typical, but they're the kind of thing make me think that something like a lever to move the civic-minded is develop here. My guess (and hope) is we'll see more of the phenomenon as the world expands, and as it expands, so too the glimmer of an influence on the real world. Will it be enough to end genocide? Certainly not now or any time soon. But it already been enough to [improve international relations](#) on a micro level. And happens, there's an even better test case coming next month-- a Los Angeles political candidate is gambling that [his virtual campaign headquarters in SL](#) will win him a seat on the City Council.

In any case, I hope to see Ethan at next year's Metaverse Roadmap, so we can compare notes. Maybe I'll be less optimistic. Or maybe he'll think SL's less like Reagan's America.

Ethan's post is here-- [read it all](#), and be sure to catch the comments section as well.

Zero Grace has [some thoughts](#) on this conversation, too.

Friday, May 12, 2006 in [Education in SL](#), [Real world in SL](#), [Research and academic SL](#) [blogger link](#) | [Permalink](#)

TrackBack

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Listed below are links to weblogs that reference [RETURN TO DARFUR](#):

» [Virtual Darfur: Civic Engagement or Fake Activism?](#) from The Click Heard Round the World

There has been an interesting debate going on between Ethan Zuckerman of ClickVoices and Hamlet at New World Notes. It's a discussion centered around the virtual Darfur Camp built by several activists to highlight the plight of [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on Saturday, May 13, 2006 at 10:00 PM

» [Nonprofits and Second Life and Other Games](#) from Beth's Blog

Susan Tenby from TechSoup demos the virtual TechSoup Office during the Netsquared Conference while Ruby Sinreich and Deborah Finn (Cyber-Yenta) talk about it. (Blogger Wagner James Au who reports on Second Life is seated next Susan.) The TechSoup... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on Monday, June 19, 2006 at 11:50 AM

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[Burning Life 2006
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[The Second Life of Mark
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hopeful makes an online
world whistle stop\)](#)

[The Devil Rezzes Prada \(The
high drama of virtual
fashion magazines\)](#)

[A Brother-HUD of Man
\(Creating the universal
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[SL Vonnegut, or Lonesome
No More! \(The author as
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Second Life of live music](#)

[The Spaces Between Us
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[The Second Life of Julian
Dibbell \(The author talks--
and sells-- "Play Money"\)](#)

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[Half a WoW \(Bigger than
Warcraft by 2008?\)](#)

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Tracked on Thursday, June 29, 2006 at 09:47 AM

Comments

Now I've read (much of) Zuckerman's comments and your article, and so offer relevant comments myself, Hamlet.

And, sure, you are --- and always have been --- all boosterish regarding SL. (N there's anything wrong with that, and not that it doesn't also provide evidence your intergrity, since you're no less gung-ho now than you were when you wor the Lindens.)

And Zuckerman's also right about the basic need being to get the raw RL infor OUT of Darfur (or sadly similar situations) in the first place.

But of course: How else to know to take necessary action?

But your point about the effectiveness of SL's 3-D immersion in providing an emotional, almost tangible connection with what's going on in remote (to so n sections of the world ... your point is well-made and well-taken.

The experts and authorities, sure, their focus will be the raw data. But if gen public response and support has ANY worth at all, then it will become imperat the 3-D, avatar-inhabited metaverse expands beyond its present, admittedly rarified, community) ... it will become imperative to present the data within SL-ish environment.

Because, yes, goddamnit: "The quality of a virtual world punctures the fourth removing the barrier between medium and participant, and translates into a willingness to engage that mediums before it do not usually encourage."

You carefully refer to that (quoted above) as anecdotal evidence. But how m anecdotal evidence is necessary (I concur, my friends concur, everyone I know has stayed in SL for more than a few months concurs) before ... well, not bef accepted as fact. (Because, hell, then religion would be equal to science and may as well give up and just kiss the feet of the whole Intelligent Design crowd idiots.)

But how many people need to experience "Active Engagement via Embodied

[The View from Jerusalem \(Wartime interviews in-world\)](#)

[Running for Life \(Avatar dash for American Cancer Society\)](#)

[New World Headlines \(Predicting the metaverse's future\)](#)

[Teenage Wasteland \(Notes from the Teen Grid\)](#)

[The Game Developer's Guide to Pwning Second Life](#)

[Avatars on Avatar-Based Marketing \(The in-world forum for the Harvard Business article\)](#)

[Protagonist of the Island Nakama \(Creating a commercial microcosm of anime\)](#)

[-- And He Rezzed a Crooked House \(After Heinlein, creating a virtual world tesseract home\)](#)

[Everything Goes Better with Daleks \(The potentials-- and perils-- of mixed reality education/non-profit events\)](#)

[Selling Dystopia \(Turning totalitarianism into a shopper's paradise\)](#)

[Counting Virtual World Clickthroughs \(Experiment in web to virtual world advertising\)](#)

[A Day Without Screenshots \(The Flickr of SL becomes a protest tool\)](#)

Interaction" before it's a viable, significant force?

When it comes to public awareness/action, it's all just a numbers game, isn't it so much in this world.

sigh

But I think you're right that the 3-D immersive metaverse would INCREASE the numbers beyond whatever amount might be reached otherwise. That's not "ut thinking," that's simply a fact.

(Although, yeah, I'm a mite cheerleaderish about SL, myself. Guilty as charged

So.

Just my somewhat errant thoughts on this complex topic, Hammie ...

Keep up the good work!

^_^

Posted by: [Memory Harker](#) | [Friday, May 12, 2006 at 11:25 AM](#)

I'm reading this and nodding my head all the way through.

I'm really excited about the way the internet and online communing is developing and evolving.

I can see some amazing shifts and changes in the world over the next 50 years Driven by the transparency of the internet. The less walls it has and the more to pool our knowledge and interact with each other, regardless of where we are who the more benefit will be derived from it.

It's exciting, I can't wait to see what unfolds...

It's an incredibly exciting time and I feel that things have yet to truly take off

Posted by: [plark](#) | [Friday, May 12, 2006 at 01:16 PM](#)

Hamlet, thank you for helping us illuminate the process behind Camp Darfur. the timing had been better on the Metaverse Roadmap Summit.

As an educator and media producer I've been handed a very unique challenge; design experiences that motivate people to take action on an issue that we'd forget about. It sucks being the one who tells kids what genocide is! Camp Darfur is one piece of that story, an idealized displacement camp where everyone

[To the Stars \(RL rocket scientists create an island of their own\)](#)

[Hooray for Bollywood \(The India-fication of avatar beauty\)](#)

[God Game \(Creating an artificial ecosystem\)](#)

[Bullet in the Head \(Or, avatar-based Russian Roulette\)](#)

[Quarter Million, Plus Change \(Debating the significance of 250K+ Residents\)](#)

[Virtual Meet-Up \(Campaigning for office in an online world\)](#)

[Going Pro in SL \(Aimee Weber's advice for paying bills with virtual world skills\)](#)

[My-Avatar- Heritage.com \(Matching online persona to real world celebrity\)](#)

[The Uncanny X-Men \(and Newscorp\) Come to Second Life](#)

[The Art of Tech War \(Creating an RTS in SL\)](#)

[Heart of Tateru \(The Asperger's advantage\)](#)

[Guarding Darfur \(When superheroes meet genocide\)](#)

[Return to Darfur \(Debating role of virtual worlds as social change tool with Ethan Zuckerman\)](#)

[Guarding Darfur \(When superheroes meet genocide\)](#)

protected by superheroes and has the food and care they need to survive. A place where people can rebuild.

We live on Better World Island because we believe that we need good examples to follow. We look for positive uplift and the best new solutions from around the world. Our scouts are from five continents...they are accountants, artists, inventors, and actors. Some have laid their lives on the line to protect the people of Darfur and others are in their care. Some are in Africa now building an orphanage, others are planning large humanitarian efforts for later this year.

At the RL Camp Darfur in Los Angeles we took potatoes and made skull stamps. Students came by and dipped the potatoes in the paint ten times, each stamp representing 100 lives. By the end of that day 400 students memorialized 100 people lost in Darfur. By the end of those five minutes those kids understood the magnitude of tragedy that they had not comprehended before.

I haven't figured out how to make these kind of experiences real in Camp Darfur yet....the videos walls are coming online next week and the Camp Darfur Committee tries to bridge the education gap for kids....but it's a meager start. We're two months in now. I'm so thankful we've had the support of the Green Lanterns and others who have been getting involved in SL and through RL advocacy in every corner of the globe.

You've hit on some very important points....I'll be sure to pass on the comic link to you soon. There's tremendous potential on remixing Second Life culture for youth education and we definitely welcome suggestions as we script and finetune Camp Darfur.

Posted by: [evonne](#) | [Friday, May 12, 2006 at 03:15 PM](#)

What seems to be getting lost in much of the back and forth in the blogosphere is that it's possible for both Hamlet and Ethan to be ... *hold your breath* ... right. I don't see either position being fundamentally incorrect. What I see are discrepancies occurring at other levels. That's a shame since it puts people at odds who should be united.

As to how the technology can be better utilized in general so that it's usefulness is more apparent, I'd refer to [something posted on RCommunication](#) by Rebecca Mackinnon:

"The question we really ought to be focusing on is: how can citizens and professional journalists work together to create a better and more well-informed public discourse?"

I disagreed. Here's my response:

[Improvise, Adapt, Oversit](#)
(When sitting was profitable)

[Creative Commons in SL: The Conducer of Mia Wombat](#) (Groundbreaking talk on IP rights in the age of Web 2.0)

[Growing Your Own](#) (Virtual life for artificial cannabis)

["The Hitchhiker of Avalon"](#) (Marvin waddles into SL)

["The Triumph of Tringo"](#) (From grid to GBA)

["Building Walls, Building Platforms"](#) (The virtual world's first official campaign HQ)

["The Gamer's Rough Guide to Pwning SL"](#)

["Yes Logo"](#) (Have a Coke(tm) and a sim...)

["The Professor and the Butterfly"](#) (MIT physicist meets fashionista)

["Meeting Lovisa"](#) (The first RL ad agency opens in SL-- for NWN)

["Zombie Pwns Doctorow!"](#) (The famed author and blogger is dragged into an impromptu demonstration in new world identity hacking)

["Unimpeachable Editorializing"](#) (Lawrence Lessig and author comments on "Unimpeachable Offense")

["Her World, Her](#)

"I would phrase that differently. Perhaps to something like this: how can citi: and professional journalists work together to make well-informed public disc fashionable?"

SL is becoming fashionable. And those interested in getting the word out might consider that it's not about educating people, it's about helping people educate themselves. Give people a reason to stop their own activities (which are their escape from life's difficulties) and make them want to learn. That's a tough or fill, but it's the one that has to be placed imo.

Posted by: [csven](#) | [Sunday, May 14, 2006 at 03:34 PM](#)

"To make well-informed public discouse fashionable."

Hee. Csven, I always suspected that Bruce Sterling was one of your meatspace

No, but really, that's such a smart distinction you made above, and coincident following the reasoning behind Sterling's Viridian movement.

Yeah, we're all of us at some kind of crux right now. Let's just try to make sur doesn't lead to crucifixion ...

Posted by: [Memory Harker](#) | [Monday, May 15, 2006 at 07:08 AM](#)

"Hee. Csven, I always suspected that Bruce Sterling was one of your meatspac alts!"

ouch

Posted by: [csven](#) | [Monday, May 15, 2006 at 08:36 AM](#)

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["Unimpeachable Offense" \(Bush vs. anti-Bush vs. Virtual World\)](#)

["The City State of Second Life" \(SL membership by city\)](#)

["Hamlet Reborn" \(The new New World Notes officially begins\)](#)

["The Skin You're In" \(An experiment with avatar race\)](#)

["The Second Life of Lawrence Lessig"](#)

["And Your Chicks for Free" \(MTV comes to SL\)](#)

["The Second Life of Thomas P.M. Barnett" \(From advising Rumsfeld and Kerry to briefing the Flying Spaghetti Monster\)](#)

["Homeland Security Comes to Second Life" \(Simulating disaster response in SL\)](#)

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["Burning Life '05" \(Burning Man made virtual\)](#)

["Sandbox Game" \(Giving a second life to their favorite games\)](#)

["The Ideal Trailer" \(Machinima as documentary filmmaking tool\)](#)

["Day of the Doctorow" \(The man, the myth-- the avatar\)](#)

Comments:

Preview

Post

["Mr. Frogg's Wild Ride"](#) (Hard luck musician literally sings for his supper)

["Into the Arms of America"](#) (SL as pro-US PR)

["Fated Inner Chomsky"](#) (A "devil's accountant" in SL)

["Evolving Nemo"](#) (Simulating Darwinism underwater)

["Making Love"](#) (The animation of desire)

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["Shooting to Kill: Bedazzle's U:SL"](#) (The toil and tears behind SL's most ambitious in-game FPS project to date)

["The Soldier's Mistress"](#) (From Jessie to Fallujah and back again)

["Jenna Fairplay and Maslow's Hierarchy of Booty"](#) (The theory behind a nightclub hostess' success)