

AVATAR POLITICS: THE SOCIAL APPLICATIONS OF SECOND LIFE

By Nancy Scola

“This new venture might be mockable, but it’s path-breakingly mockable.”
-National Journal’s The Hotline On Call

In August of 2006, a digital representation of former Virginia governor Mark Warner stepped onto a virtual stage. It was a raucous crowd he faced, and a wide cast of characters – a rotund woman covered by only a bikini, a dwarf in colonial garb, assorted Washington reporters clad in body-hugging t-shirts and jeans. From behind a laptop in his Alexandria office, Warner was breaking new ground, becoming the first major political figure to formally enter into the online virtual world known as Second Life.

Up on the virtual stage was not the Governor himself, of course, but his avatar ('a-vuh-"tär), a term rooted in Hinduism. In the digital age its meaning of “the visual representation of self” is more closely tied to sci-fi writer Neal Stephenson’s popular futuristic 1992 work *Snow Crash*. Interviewed by in-world reporter Hamlet Au, Warner’s virtual double was draped in an outfit that could have come from the Governor’s own closet – blue blazer, white shirt, red power tie, khaki slacks.

What was the impetus for injecting Warner, a possible presidential candidate at the time, into Second Life? Strangely enough, the answer is Suzanne Vega. Singer-songwriter Vega is perhaps best known for her 1987 hit “Luka” (“My name is Luka. I live on the floor. I live upstairs from you. Yes I think you’ve seen me before.”) Earlier in the summer, Vega had been interviewed and played a short set in Second Life. This particular virtual world had been on my radar screen for some time, and I had created an avatar for myself back in May. But when I came across a short YouTube clip of Vega’s Second Life foray, I went beyond interested to intrigued.

The video showed Vega’s avatar in a discussion with that of NBC correspondent and freelance journalist John Hockenberry, with the singer casually riffing on the meaning of her song “The Queen and the Soldier.” Small talk finished. A virtual guitar popped into her lap. Lights dimmed in the small theater. As she began to strum and sing, I settled into my desk chair to watch the show.

And watch I did, for minutes on minutes. Bear in mind that I had but the most minimal of interest in Vega’s music and that this was a video clip of an already-completed *virtual* event. It did not matter. This environment was so richly detailed that I had the feeling of being welcomed into an intimate experience. It was all just lit-up pixels, yes. But every sensation told me I was



there, with Vega and Hockenberry and amongst the others avatars in the audience. The video ended. I was hooked. Via a link on YouTube, I hopped to a behind-the-scenes clip showing how developers had crafted Vega's virtual guitar. Wood slats were shaped into the various parts of the instrument's body, then strings, frets, and tuning pegs affixed to its base.

The Physical Internet

As mentioned, the avatar – the building block of life in Second Life – was inspired by *Snow Crash*. But beyond just avatars, Stephenson's work articulated the next generation of the Internet itself. He called it the “metaverse,” a virtual reality space in which we might carry out our lives in cyberspace – tweaking our appearances and interacting with strangers.

Linden Lab, the company behind Second Life, readily admits that *Snow Crash* was the seed from which their virtual world sprouted. Linden calls their world “the grid.” But it might be most useful to take a step back and think of Second Life this way. It is not the newest digital tool or video game. It is simply an environment. It's not too far off to see Second Life like a software version of those eco-sphere self-contained aquariums, complete with water and plants and small sea creatures. Second Life is not the next blog or a chat room for the 21st century. Think of it instead as the physical Internet.

In Second Life, our avatars walk and talk in much the same way that we ourselves do in the organic world. But they also lack some of the limitations that hold us back in so-called “meat space.” They are free to sprint across open plains, teleport to far away islands, and fly over oceans. (I joke that soaring through the air is the Second Life's gateway drug. It's one of the first skills users learn after creating their avatar and feels, well, *simply awesome.*)

Understanding that physicality of Second Life is key to understanding its appeal and importance. It is critical to the functioning of the metaverse. Linden Lab, on the advice of law professor and intellectual property pioneer Larry Lessig, decided early on to enshrine “laws” that would promote the world's physical growth. Second Life would be an ownership society. As residents (as users are known) build up this virtual world – constructing houses, designing avatar clothing – they retain all legal rights to their creative works. According to Linden's Terms of Service, “you create it, you own it – and it's yours to do with as you please.”¹ Linden set up a currency exchange where real-world money can be swapped for Linden dollars, and vice versa. In practice, Robbie Dingo, the designer of Vega's guitar, was able to pocket a real profit from the building and selling of that virtual instrument. (Dingo may well have a shop somewhere in the metaverse trading in “Suzanne Vega Replica Virtu-Guitars.”)

A brisk economy has developed as a result. Thousands, if not millions, in U.S. dollar profit have been made by residents buying, developing, and selling virtual real estate.² Real-world clothing designers have supplemented or even replaced their income streams by selling avatar fashions.

¹ IP Rights, SecondLife.com (undated) (online at http://secondlife.com/whatis/ip_rights.php).

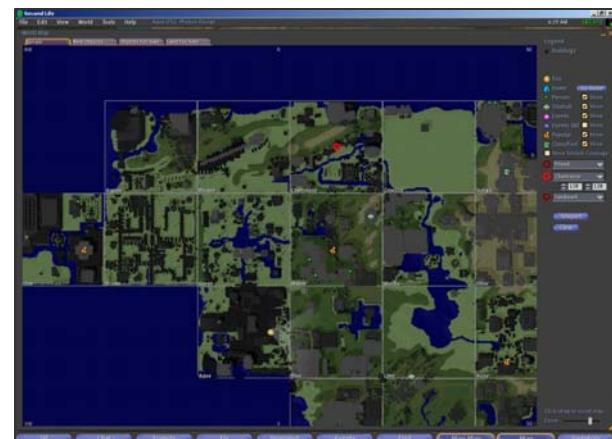
² A Second Lifer by the name of Anshe Chung has claimed to have made \$1 million in profit from in-world “real estate” development, but that achievement has not yet been independently verified. CNNmoney.com's Legal Pad (December 9, 2006) (online at <http://money.cnn.com/blogs/legalpad/index.html#116465196356370476>).

Why would anyone spend real cash to outfit a digital representation of themselves? Avatar vanity, perhaps. But more to the point, simple pleasure. I'm not much of a fashion maven offline. But before I accompanied Governor Warner into Second Life, I spent the better part of an enjoyable afternoon shopping for something appropriate and flattering to wear in-world. Guided by "Astrid Ophelia," a noted Second Life fashionista, we browsed a virtual department store. I selected and paid for a slinky white pantsuit and pink high-heeled sandals, laying out a couple bucks in the process.

I'm not alone. Linden Lab keeps careful tabs on the money flowing through Second Life. On August 30, 2006 – the day Governor Warner stepped onto the virtual stage for the first time – Second Life residents reportedly spent more than \$300,000 in-world. On December 21, 2006, Linden Labs reported that nearly \$900,000 had moved through the world in the past 24 hours.

The flourishing Second Life economy is fueled, at least in part, by a sharp growth in in-world population. Total residents – a counting of every account created – stands at over two million today. The number of active users is much lower; on December 21, 2006, Linden reported that 824,511 residents had logged into Second Life in the last 60 days. (Some digital commentators have criticized Linden for calculating user “churn rate” using a 60 day cycle rather than the more common 30 days. And many so-called residents admittedly create accounts but return to Second Life seldom, if ever. But it is a mistake to imagine that the utility and potential of Second Life hinges upon users whiling away countless hours in-world. Many users create free accounts to attend one-off events, such as the Vega concert or Warner interview, and may not return until a next event strikes their fancy. The technological savvy of many online today, coupled with the increase in computing power of even consumer-grade equipment, means that users can jump in-world and back out again quite easily.)

Keeping in mind that the first prototype of Second Life was unveiled just four years ago, that population increase is eye-catching. By all metrics, the world is growing on a steep incline. While beginning accounts are free, residents have the option of upgrading to premium accounts that carry a weekly stipend allotment and the option to become a landowner. At the dawn of 2005, some 5,300 residents had opted for the premium upgrade. By November of this year, 42,400 premium users had. The Second Life universe is limited to about 4.5 times the size of the island of Manhattan. At the beginning of 2005, some 28 square kilometers of that space had been snatched up. As 2006 closes, nearly 255 square kilometers have been purchased and settled.



So Second Life is a rich, physical environment. And while it's healthy to discuss the metrics by which we measure its success, the world is undisputedly growing. But still we're left with a question – just what are we supposed to *do* with Second Life? A Suzanne Vega concert might be a nice diversion; a one-off interview with a potential presidential candidate might be a fun lark.

But how do we operating in the political space make an investment of time and money in Second Life worth our while?

First, a caveat. Though perhaps not the most satisfying answer, the most honest one is this: we just don't know yet. We haven't yet boiled down Second Life's best practices or figured out how to inoculate ourselves from failing in the world. But we can't fairly expect ourselves to. Second Life debuted in 2002. At a comparable point in the evolution of the World Wide Web, the world was still wrangling with just how to work a hyperlink. Still, the richness of the Second Life environment and some early experiences and experiments do give us some indications of how we might move ahead.

Social and Political Engagement in Second Life

In the political context, Second Life's most obvious benefit is one of geography. Virtual locations are not tied to any offline place. Participants don't have to be proximate; in fact, it matters not a whit if they are or not. For all the up-ending of traditional presidential politics brought by MeetUp in 2004, that model still required that Howard Dean's supporters be located in the same city or town as one another. Second Life changes that.

To far less fan fare, some Second Lifers have organized a "Doctors for Wesley Clark" virtual chapter. Whether you are a cardiologist in Des Moines or gynecologist in Dallas, Second Life creates a space in which you could "meet" with others like you. You might use the virtual space to discuss, say, how to utilize the General's demonstrated commitment to science to his electoral advantage. Here is a forum in which a small and scattered affinity group can meet and strengthen its internal ties. And imagine a virtual meeting of Doctors for Clark where the candidate himself could pop in. He could chat with supporters, giving them the chance to discuss how he might parry questions on stem cells at an upcoming *Meet the Press* appearance.

This sort of interaction, between what one might call a figurehead and his or her supporters, is already taking place in-world. Judge Richard Posner of the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals is well known for his eloquent opinions on privacy, online taxation, and other issues of interest to the tech-minded. One recent Thursday night, Judge Posner spent two hours in Second Life debating the finer points of the law with a crowd of avatars. One of the most active participants was raccoon avatar who later outed himself as an intellectual-property lawyer based in Washington DC. For attorney or layman, it was a unique opportunity to engage with a great legal mind.

But beyond creating the space to chat with four-star generals and other national figures, Second Life can ease peer-to-peer social connections. I had the chance recently, at a get-together of progressive activists in Washington DC, to meet several people who are exploring the use the virtual world to political ends. We had a great session. But after the event, we quickly spread out across the country – I live in New York, Ruby in North Carolina, Andrew in San Francisco, and so on. Every Wednesday, however, that same group reconvenes in Second Life. In fact, I sat down with the gang recently, our avatars sitting cross-legged in circle. For about an hour, we

chewed over the ideas in this paper, a continuation of the discussion are physical selves had started.

You might be thinking, “isn’t that the sort of thing you can already do on the Internet.” It’s a tempting thought, but how really? In the past, the closest have come to achieving this depth of interaction was through a blog comment thread or a chat room. But the difference between those tools and the virtual world is real. Blogs and chat rooms lack the physicality, immediacy, and nuance of Second Life. Using those tools, you can’t whisper to your neighbor, show loyalty (or pique) by hunkering down in one part of the room or another. **Second Life’s combination of real-time interaction and physical embodiment create a space unlike anything else online.**

And for another thing, you don’t generally buy rideable virtual yaks on a blog or in a chat room. Each holiday season, the U.K. branch of Save the Children sells sponsorships of the pack animals to provide resources to children in need around the world. But this year, they ran out of flesh-and-blood yaks. So the organization took to Second Life, creating a virtual yak that can be had for 1000 Linden dollars – the equivalent of about \$3.50 US.

The question is both fair and obvious – why in the world would anyone spend real money on a digital yak? For starters, owning a virtual yak is fun. It can be rode and milked, its wool knitted into luxurious sweaters in which to clothe your avatar. (A sort of fun, of course, that many of us don’t experience in our non-virtual lives.) The immediate appeal of the project for Save the Children is obvious – it’s a vehicle for micro-contributions. But beyond that, the digital yak project gins up interest in the organization’s work and gives supporters a memorable way by which to take action on its behalf.



In assessing the point of political projects in Second Life, an eye should be kept on interactivity and a means by which to take action. One of the earliest activist projects in Second Life was an experience called Camp Darfur, modeled on the refugee camps sprinkled throughout western Sudan and eastern Chad in northeast Africa. The goal of Camp Darfur was to create an immersion experience, one in which SLers might wander through the tented village and get a sense of the desolation and deprivation faced by displaced persons.

This idea of creating virtual “experiences” in Second Life had been used to success in the past, most notably in a project known as the schizophrenia house, created by a University of California at Davis psychiatry professor. The goal of the schizophrenia house is to help students to *feel* the contorted circumstances that a delusional patient might experience as they go about their daily lives. The walls talk and the floors fall out beneath their avatars’ feet. But the success of Camp Darfur has been limited, the experience not sufficiently *real* to convey what it is like to be a refugee. The physical hardships of displacement – hauling water miles from well to shelter, traveling through hostile territory to forage for a few sticks of fire wood – weren’t recreated in the virtual camp. (And Camp Darfur might have learned something from the mental

route taken by the schizophrenia house – refugees suffer at discouraging rates from depression, hopelessness, and emotional fatigue.) As a model for political engagement, Camp Darfur was hindered by the fact that there was not all that much to do in the space. There were no yaks to buy, no real action that engaged the Second Lifer in the refugee experience.

As they create virtual experiences to educate around their missions, political organizations of all shapes and sizes can naturally take lessons from the successes and failings of the Save the Children Yak Shack, Camp Darfur, and the schizophrenia house. The potential for future successes is great. One can easily imagine, say, a national environmental non-profit developing a virtual rainforest in Second Life. In rich 3-D detail, the virtual cloud forest might show the extent and details of the destruction in the Amazon, the species at risk, and even coach supporters in active steps that might be taken toward ensuring its protection. (Imagine an activist avatar jumping in front of an oncoming digital bulldozer).

Or, on the electoral side, the day is not far off when we might see a fully-featured candidate headquarters in Second Life. What might that look like? Perhaps a lot like a real campaign HQ. It would likely have “Smith for Congress” yard signs piled up in the corner and campaign literature scattered on tables. Bags of buttons and stacks of bumper stickers fill up the shelves. Supporters flowing in and out of the front door pick up materials to pass out throughout the virtual universe. A few staffers milling about, answering questions for the curious, and directing committed volunteers into useful activity.

Those might be the basics for a virtual HQ. But the possibilities certainly do not end there. This is one situation where we can pretty easily imagine how a virtual experience might be better, richer, and fuller than the equivalent offline one. It is important to remember that in one important respect, this virtual world is quite different than those eco-sphere globes. Second Life is not a hermetically-sealed environment, completely shut off from the outside world. Rather, digital content easily flows in from the Internet and back out again. Billboards in Second Life can be configured to display websites, digital photographs, and video and audio feeds from the “outside” world. Potential supporters might wander in to a candidate’s HQ to find a slideshow from the latest campaign rally displayed on one wall and video clips submitted by local activists running on a screen in a back corner. And remember the campaign literature stacked on the virtual tables? In Second Life, an avatar might flip through a few pieces and chat over a few of the talking points with a staffer or fellow volunteer. If she finds a piece that would resonate in her off-line community, with a click or two she can send it to her printer and be armed with printed materials with which to sway her neighbors.

Remember that it does not matter a bit if the bricks-and-mortar campaign HQ is five miles away or 500. And if there is to be said that there is a genius to Second Life, this is it: it combines the spatial-independence of the Internet with the rich experiences of actual lived world.

Of course, in 2006, political campaigns still require supporters putting their feet to the pavement at some point. So back in the corner of that virtual headquarters we build a training center. Volunteers from across the district or across the country gather to get first-hand instruction from the field director on how to go door-to-door – complete with role play. (There might even be a virtual neighborhood street built in the training center where supporters can practice their door-

knocking skills.) In a library, scripts and background papers are accessible with one click. The candidate's hagiographic campaign video and latest television commercials and web videos run constantly in a screening room. Supporters with common interests can have regular meetings to plot how to promote their issue in the course of the campaign.

And there need not even be a candidate. In recent years, *Draft Smith*-style movements have experienced a measure of success in recruiting political candidates and promoting them to prominence. (Signs indicate that they may well be a factor in the 2008 presidential race.) The appeal of a Second Life headquarters for a movement lacking a declared candidate is perhaps even greater than for more formal campaign organizations. For minimal overhead, a virtual HQ creates a gathering spot – and rallying point – for supporters and activists who might otherwise be scattered about the country. And again, there are rich training opportunities. For example, volunteers who have been through the draft movement ringer can school newbies on how the process might work; online-savvy supporters mold others into Internet activists to act on the potential candidates behalf.

Of course, the opportunity to recruit and educate supporters – at low cost and with little barrier to entry – is appealing to not only political campaigns. It extends to non-profit organizations and grassroots political groups as well. For bodies like these to hold, say, monthly meetings across the U.S., requires an enormous commitment of time, money, and attention. And importantly, attending of these offline sessions asks much of supporters, who might need to hire a babysitter or spend precious free time traveling to some central meeting place. There is some level of commitment implicit in even showing up at one of these gatherings – as soon as a walk in the front door, I've been marked as a potential supporter of a cause about which I might be merely curious.

Imagine now a group – either a national non-profit with chapters across the country or a local grassroots movement sprung up around a particular issue – that recognizes that Second Life is adept at tearing down barriers and roadblocks. They use Second Life to hold formal or informal sessions, billing them as simply virtual “open houses.” As a casually-interested and politically-minded avatar, you might wander in to the meeting, take a seat, and listen a bit. A short video is shown, some pictures of their latest action are scrolled through, and you have a chance to ask a question or two of the organization’s leadership. You might find that the group’s mission resonates with you. Thus you decide to add your name to their roster and drop a few Linden bucks in their coffers (which is easily convertible to U.S. dollars). Or you decide that the group has got the whole issue wrong. Getting up on your chair, you announce that you’re starting a group in favor of tearing down the whole Amazonian rainforest. The first meeting of “End Toucan Tyranny” will be meeting outside, starting in five minutes. And you march your avatar right out the door.

What's Next?

We've thus far discussed forms of political engagement that are possible right now in Second Life; some have taken place in-world already and others are the next obvious steps. But there are so many others. In the real world we might say that we are only limited by our imagination. But

in Second Life that cliché comes close to being true. If we loosen the reins a bit on our creativity, what else might we dream up? What could be done with Second Life today, or in our next campaign or political action?

- In a typical high-profile political campaign, a big celebrity – a singer or actor, most likely – might express a desire to hold an event to support to a candidate or cause, only to have scheduling or logistics (or commitment) kills the idea before it comes to pass. In Second Life, a laptop, a free hour or two, and an in-world venue moves the quickly event from conception to execution. The troops are entertained, some hearts and minds are won, and the celebrity guest isn't too scarred by the process to return for another round of political engagement.
- The official meetings and conventions of state or national political parties are often unwieldy beasts, closed to many members either out of intention (the party leaders like it that way) or circumstances (the schedule is hard to pin down, attending requires long distance travel). We might see the official party organizations holding open meetings every so often in Second Life. Or, if they choose not to, we might witness activists organizing parallel meetings in the metaverse, where time is spent plotting the takeover of the official party apparatus.
- Second Life might spawn a whole new profession in the political realm, that of metaverse fundraiser. Not all too long ago, the cutting edge in raising money online was having a bat graphic that was colored in as the contribution dollars piled up. By doing away with many of the bonds of reality – time, space, physics, and (to some degree) social constraints – Second Life has blown the doors off of the old models of fundraising. The conclusion of the Yak Shack project is for the yak masters to tweak the appearance of their animal and trot them back to the Save the Children barn on an appointed day. The owner of the most appealingly altered yak wins a chance at an interview in an in-world magazine. While we will likely see organizations start with more traditional models for their SL fundraising, such as hawking t-shirts or hosting ticketed lecture series, the art will quickly evolve to the point where customized yak avatar contests seem rudimentary.
- As the Internet came into maturity, advertising specialists were some of the earliest adopters of the new technology amongst the professional political crowd. This makes sense, of course, as the targeted delivery of content online were attractive to clients and the new models of multi-media ads opened up niches in the field. As with fundraising, Second Life opens up a wide range of possibilities for the execution of political advertising. (Perhaps there's space for an ad on the side of that yak, or a sponsorship opportunity for Suzanne Vega's next concert.) At the least, we might soon see political ad firms setting up shop in Second Life, running virtual galleries to display their wares.

The Physical Internet Beyond Second Life

We are in the earliest days of Second Life. Knowing the way that the online world has evolved thus far, in five years we may (a) be so immersed in Second Life that we simply know it as the

Metaverse and it functions as our day-to-day physical Internet or (b) be saying “Second Life who?” Given that Linden Lab has shown signs of late that it is committed to developing Second Life as an open platform, the first seems slightly more likely to me than that second. But in truth, the fate of the virtual world does not hinge upon the success of one application run by a handful of people in a few California offices. While Second Life is the most well-developed and populated of the online environments of the *Snow Crash* model, the virtual experience is just too compelling to be tied to its particular fortune. Call it the metaverse, call it the physical Internet. Whatever its name, the richness of the medium, the tech savviness of the public, and the advance in the capacity of consumer computer equipment point to the possibility that it will flourish in the years to come.

With that flourishing comes new opportunities in the political context, accompanied by new challenges. Before Mark Warner dropped out of presidential consideration, our staff was in the process of planning his next Second Life appearance. Should the event be text-based, like the first one was, with the Governor typing back and forth to communicate with the interviewer and avatar crowd? While it worked well for that event, the lag time between the questions and responses dampened the mood a bit in the theater (and some avatars, in the lull, took to practicing flying loop-de-loops above the Governor’s head.) Would it make more sense to hook the Governor up to a microphone – like Vega was in her appearance – so that he could talk to the crowd in his natural voice? It did seem to make for a warmer and more personable experience in that case.

Finally, should he wear a jacket and tie this time?

In Real Politics, Why Bother with Virtual Worlds?

It may seem silly to fret about the virtual wardrobe of a potential presidential candidate’s avatar. But that what the digital Warner wears is even a consideration (and it was) points to a core reason why Second Life, why the metaverse, is so compelling – particularly in the political context. With each new Second Life account, a basic avatar is assigned, generic looking and dressed in a bland t-shirt and jeans get-up. From there, it’s off to the races. It’s a bit mind-blowing the speed and fervor with which new users customize their avatars. Some choose to take the shape of an animal, others to tweak their skin color, and others to (as I did) replicate their real-world appearance – though often they end up (as I did) with avatars a bit younger, thinner, and better-looking than they do in real life.

Our Second Life avatars are a representation of our best selves, our most fun selves, at the least, the uniqueness of ourselves. Second Life gives us a chance to interact with others in the way that we choose to represent our natures. That many of us choose just to recreate who we are offline, though perhaps tweaked a bit for improvements, might mean that we’re hungry for person-to-person interactions where we’re thought of as individuals. We want to be seen and dealt with as distinct creatures. Contrast that with modern politics, where the concept of the unique voter with personalized hopes and dreams and fears has been replaced by the understanding of every American as a member of a demographic slice. In Second Life, we relate

to each other as individuals. It may seem odd to resort to virtual reality to revert back to person-to-person interaction, but no one said the times we live in are not strange ones.

Second Life in particular and the metaverse as a whole are very much in their infancies. The future of the virtual world in the political context will likely be a road paved with more failures than successes. We do not yet know what we are doing in the virtual world, and that ignorance will likely show in our efforts. But with the barriers to entry so low and the potential enjoyment so great, those failures will be at the same time minimally painful and highly educational. Consider how Second Life might complement your political mission. Certainly do your due diligence. But while you're thinking and planning, go ahead and jump in-world. See a concert, tweak your avatar, and buy yourself a yak.

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