

THE FUTURE OF YOU

Virtual Worlds, Virtual Lives

Think the Net has changed your life? Wait until it becomes an immersive 3D environment.

AN ONLINE GAME is an odd place to have your reputation precede you. But that's exactly what happened to me not long ago in the massively multiplayer universe of EVE Online. My character there, a spaceship pilot named Walker Spaight, was minding his own business one day when I got a message from ►

BY MARK WALLACE • ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL



another player, who wanted to know if I was “the same Walker Spaight from Second Life,” another 3D online world.

Indeed I was, I told him. And the response I got back was curious. My interlocutor was excited to meet a “virtual celebrity.” In EVE I may simply be a midlevel combat pilot, but in Second Life I am among the best-known figures in a community of 250,000 or more. As editor of the *Second Life Herald*, an online newspaper covering events in Second Life, I have been digging up stories for the last two years, profiling players and their creations (and not infrequently, their crimes), reporting on the businesses emerging there, and taking to task the company that runs the world.

While it may seem as though I’m reporting on a game, 3D virtual worlds like Second Life are becoming a very real component of people’s lives, and

over the next ten years they will begin to shape the way we work, play, and define our identities. To Philip Rose-dale, founder and CEO of Linden Lab, the creator of Second Life, online worlds constitute nothing less than “a new means of human expression.”

“Interest in virtual world research has really exploded in 2006.”

—RON BLECHNER, AKA “HIRO PENDRAGON”



MORE THAN A GAME

THOUGH PERHAPS ONLY 800,000 people have ever dipped their toes into Second Life, massively multi-player games are going strong. Game worlds such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *EVE Online* are regularly visited by anywhere from 20 million to 40 million people around the world, and that number continues to grow.

But persistent worlds like Second Life are more than just games. In Second Life, players don’t get points for slaying orcs or blowing up spaceships. Instead, users are given a framework to create whatever they please—from houses, cars, and clothing to anything else they can dream up.

In fact, the entire landscape is composed of such creations; the company that runs the world provides only the virtual real estate that residents occupy. In that sense, worlds like Second Life function more as platforms than as games—they’re places where both outlandish fantasies and useful tools can be constructed. Residents rely on the same spirit (and much of the data) underlying Web 2.0 sites to freely borrow, build on, and mash up each other’s ideas in an environment with unparalleled expressive powers.

Aficionados often refer to this intersection between 3D worlds and networked data as the “metaverse,” a term coined by Neal Stephenson in his prescient 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. And the impact of that combination can already be felt today.

“Entertainment, education, art, and business are throwing spaghetti at the metaverse to see what sticks,” says futurist Jerry Paffendorf, who convened a Metaverse Roadmap Summit this summer to plot the course of such technologies. “Over the next several years, we’ll see this kind of technology mature to the point where it will not be uncommon to follow

hyperlinks from the Web into immersive virtual spaces filled with other people.”

Constructing those virtual spaces has already yielded some interesting opportunities. In early 2006, 26-year-old Ron Blechner quit his job as a cellular network technician to set up shop in Second Life. The small company that he founded, Out of Bounds Software, specialized in creating a virtual presence for nonprofit agencies and educational institutions, and developed a “3D wiki” that is being used to collect community feedback for the multi-million-dollar redesign of a public park in Queens, New York. The pay wasn’t great, but Blechner’s business steadily grew; and by the end of the year, he had merged his virtual-world services shop with a larger one. “This has been the best decision I’ve made in my life,” says Blechner.

More significantly, Queens will soon have a park designed, in part, within a virtual world.

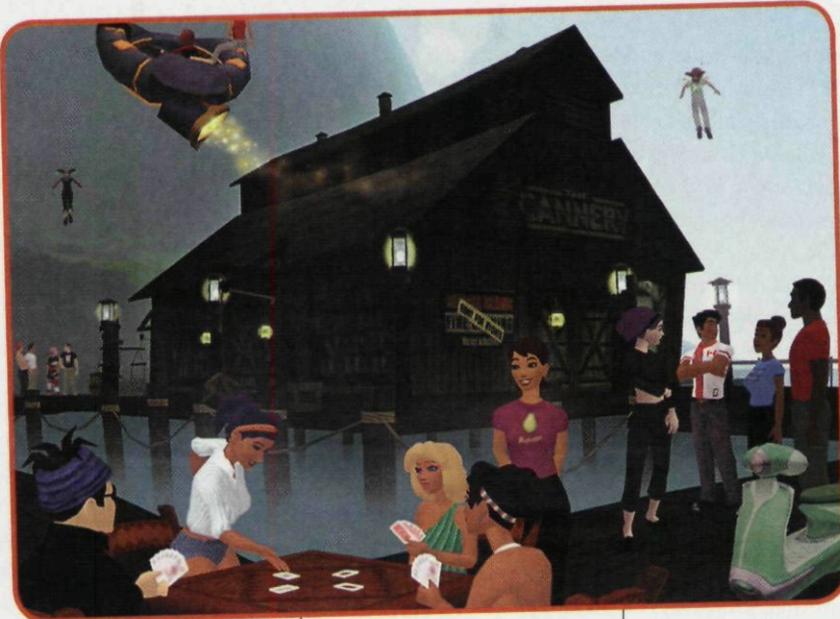
Though they’re just beginning to take hold, such online “places” are increasingly becoming a part of real-world business, marketing, and design plans. Architects now use Second Life to create design prototypes for clients. Emergency-services departments use it to develop crisis response strategies. Starwood Hotels uses it to design and advertise its new Aloft properties. And the entertainment industry has caught on big-time. MTV built a virtual version of its hit television show *Laguna Beach* in There.com, where fans can meet and socialize in a digital re-creation of the show’s locations. And next August, Duran Duran will open a “futuristic utopia” in Second Life, where the band will give concerts and chat with fans. Nick Rhodes, the band’s keyboardist and songwriter,

says it’s “the most substantial move forward in entertainment technology that I’ve seen almost going back to MTV.”

Following hot on the heels of the entertainment industry are major banks, public relations firms, auto manufacturers, and other companies that have virtual-world projects already in the works. Small firms like Blechner’s—and larger counterparts such as Millions of Us, Rivers Run Red (the company responsible for bringing Duran Duran to Second Life), and the Electric Sheep Company—are helping to turn those projects into realities. (Full disclosure: The Sheep are among the sponsors of my blog, 3pointD.com.)

A NEW MEANS OF HUMAN EXPRESSION

FOR TRUE BELIEVERS, the metaverse represents an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of what promises to be a world-changing technology: an easy-to-use interface with immense expressive power, through which



THE FUTURE NOW THERE.COM

Focusing more heavily on such activities as chat and avatar creation than users of Second Life do, the inhabitants of There.com use its space to interact, play, and meet people.

people can share new kinds of information and interact in new ways. Though the metaverse is unlikely to replace the Web in its entirety—after all, reading a newspaper is easier on a flat computer

screen than in a 3D world—it will expand the Internet’s usefulness in ways that may revolutionize people’s lives no less radically than the Web has over the past 15 years. Imagine reading a news story, clicking through to a 3D recreation of the place where the event occurred, and then walking around it in the company of other people who are reading the same story at the same time.

Of course, the pirates, pranksters, and thieves who currently plague the Web will eventually make their way to this new medium. Second Life events are regularly “griefed” by users who delight in building cages around others’ avatars, for instance, or who release self-replicating objects in an effort to choke the world’s servers into shutting down. Designers of virtual worlds must develop tools to deal ▶

31% of respondents would make their avatar look the way they wish they did.

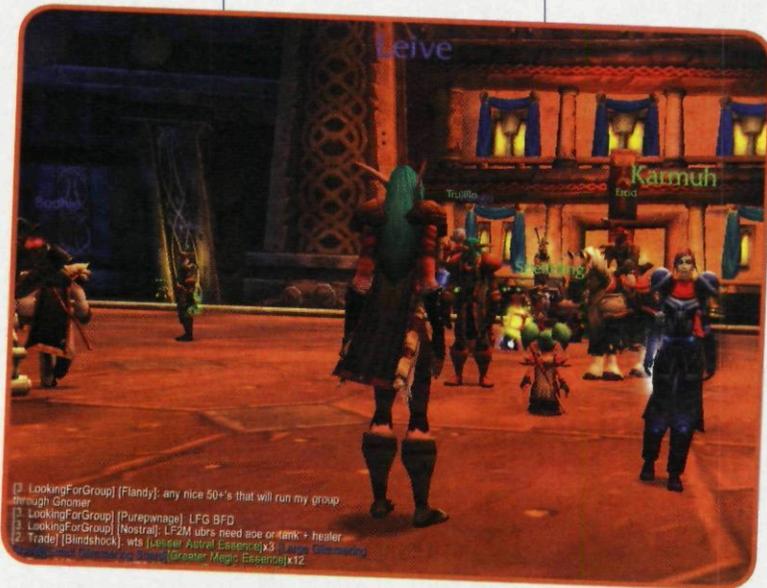
—SOURCE: PCWORL.D.COM POLL

-SOURCE: LINDEN LAB

with these issues and to make their worlds' environment more conducive to harmony than to hostility.

Sites such as MySpace, Flickr, and CyWorld (a 3D MySpace clone) demonstrate the strength of people's desire to express themselves online easily and richly, and to share what they have to say with friends and family, and with other observers.

Linden Lab's Rosedale believes that 3D worlds online are destined to play a critical role in extending that power of ex-



pression and interaction. "The real world is not as malleable as we would like it to be," Rosedale says. "Because of the degree to which Second Life is alterable, it is likely in a few years that everyone will have an identity in 3D worlds. Your identity there—the representation that will be your body, your persona in Second Life—will probably be a more accurate depiction of who you are mentally than the body that you walk around in."

HARNESSING 3D WORLDS

E-MAIL, INSTANT MESSAGING, chat, VoIP, and videoconferencing connect people with varying degrees of richness. But none of these possess the power of even the simplest interac-

tions in a virtual world. Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes was fascinated to see a group of avatars in Second Life all look in the same direction at something happening nearby. That never happens on a chat channel. And it's just the beginning.

THE FUTURE NOW THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

One of the most popular online games, World of Warcraft hosts millions of players connected on hundreds of servers worldwide. Its scenarios often encourage team play and the formation of "guilds"—groups of gamers who play and chat together.

Online worlds like Second Life let you observe, collaborate, and interact at a new level. There, you can attend a talk by Kurt Vonnegut or a live concert by Suzanne Vega. You and your team can build a venue for similar talks, and track the project's status on a virtual whiteboard. Once your shows begin, you can track who attends and how long they stay, and upload the data to a Web site for analysis.

Web-based tools and 3D online spaces are already beginning to converge. A group of Amazon.com employees have built an interface for searching Amazon's inventory from within Second Life. American Apparel's recently opened Second Life presence allows you to browse and buy products in much the same way. Social software, shopping sites, Web applications, and even search and wikis have begun to take on new and more powerful three-dimensional forms.

Imagine a Google Earth that you can not only zoom into but also walk around in with other people. And think of all the useful ways your favorite Google Maps mash-ups could be extended into three dimensions.

As more and more online data extends itself into the real world, it too will become part of the metaverse. Many of the attendees at the Metaverse Roadmap Summit envisioned a future in which the objects around us stream data to handheld devices.

What I'm describing is more than just a portable World Wide Web. It's a way to collect and access information that changes depending on where you go and who you're with—whether those places and people are real or virtual. It may sound a bit sci-fi, but the advances of the past 15 years suggest that we'll continue to integrate our physical selves more and more tightly with the informational processes going on around us.

There are lots of questions to answer, and many hurdles to overcome, but none are insurmountable. As millions of people experience virtual worlds, technologists, legislators, and developers will face new challenges. It's not too early to start thinking about these issues. The online world of the future is already here. ■

Freelance writer Mark Wallace is the editor of the *Second Life Herald* and writes about virtual worlds at 3pointD.com.

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