



## The (not so) real world

*Internet site Second Life blurs line between real and virtual life*

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Some things never change.

When Ritu Marwah entered [Second Life](#), an Internet site resembling a 3-D virtual world, she was hoping to make new friends. But Marwah, a South Bay resident, was treated pretty much the way any new neighborhood kid gets treated: She was ignored — or teased.

"I didn't know how to use it. I was trying to find a mentor," the 47-year-old marketing executive said.

"Three people on the screen killed me as they played paint-balling. They called me 'newbie.' I wandered onto the beach, but I didn't know anybody. My son had a similar experience," she said.

Marwah entered Second Life because her son, a high school student, was interested in simulated games. They decided to start a soccer field in Second Life, where the boy could play online soccer and invite others to join him. But after many attempts, it proved too difficult to get everyone to show up at the same time.

Eventually, mother and son gave up.

But thousands of other people haven't. More than 65,000 users log in to the Web site every day to socialize, stroll beaches, visit islands and cities, shop, attend lectures and classes, visit libraries and night clubs and do business.

One million Second Life "residents" from across the globe have logged in during the last 60 days. More than 14 million residents are registered, according to the Second Life Web site. Sixty percent are men; 40 percent are women, with most being 30 years old or older, according to Stanford researcher Nick Yee.

Created in 2003 by San Francisco-based Linden Labs, a privately held company, Second Life evolved out of virtual role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and the popular sword-and-sorcery World of Warcraft.

But Second Life isn't a game, according to Linden Labs, which touts the site as the next evolutionary stage of the Internet. It merges the Web with online games, social networking, user-generated content, creativity and telecommunications technologies.

In Second Life, one can imagine, create and even own a part of the virtual world. To participate, users take on "avatars" — onscreen characters that may have nothing to do with their real selves. Men can be women; the old can be young again.

Businesses and universities also participate in Second Life, using the site for teaching, global conferences, product testing and merchandise sales. And nonprofit and philanthropic organizations use Second Life as a platform for outreach, working collaboratively to address global problems such as starvation, health care and global warming.

Second Life even has its own economy and currency — Linden dollars (L\$) — which can be exchanged for U.S. dollars at rate of approximately L\$270/US\$1. People buy and sell virtual land, buildings, homes, furniture, cars, clothes and take vacations, all within Second Life.

Services range from group and individual therapy to complete avatar makeovers.

And people find common ground in Second Life, forming groups affiliated by similar interests that establish a persistent presence in the virtual world.

In Second Life, even Alice in Wonderland would no longer be a work of fiction.

People who dive through the looking glass can join the Church of the Reformed Squid or the Ancient Order of Bumbling Twits. There are vampires and troglodytes, faeries and crime syndicates. It is even possible to "kill" someone but never go to jail.

For a 24-year-old woman who in real life works in collections, Second Life offered a chance to have a second family that would hopefully be an improvement over her actual childhood.

Using an avatar named Sayluhus Flaks, the woman, who would not give her real name, depicts herself in Second Life as a little girl with dark, curly locks, a red polka-dot dress and red Mary Janes.

"My mommy use to have a 'doption agency an' das how I finded hers den eberybody else jus' kinna got found," she said of her virtual family

while sucking on a pacifier.

But even in Second Life, family relationships can be "very, very intense," Flaks said.

"I found a great mommy and aunties, but the dad and the brother left because of relationship issues and family issues that we couldn't resolve," she said.

"Second Life can be used as an escape from real-life stress, but sometimes Second Life can be stressful," she said. "It does in some ways mirror RL (real life). It does help work out issues for a lot of people and for me it does."

If all this transference into the virtual world seems strange, in many ways, it isn't so far removed from what humans have been doing in real life all along, according to Jeremy Bailenson, director of Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL).

"We have multiple social selves now. Minor alterations such as haircuts, makeup and dressing up are seen as socially acceptable if not socially desirable," said Bailenson, who began his career as a cognitive psychologist.

Second Life offers more than escapism, proponents and researchers say. It helps people try on different lives they wouldn't or couldn't have experienced before, with a potential for greater empathy.

What makes the virtual self so powerful is that the human brain isn't wired to differentiate between the real and the virtual, Bailenson said. That failure to distinguish can create many complex feelings and reactions, he said.

The experience is not unlike the suspension of disbelief that drives people's abilities to empathize with fictional characters, he said. People have been experiencing the same sense of immersion since the rise of technology.

"When you are talking on the phone, you don't know what someone on the other end is doing. There is this sense that they are hanging on to our every word," he said.

In the lab at Stanford, research subjects wearing a pair of virtual goggles who are asked to walk a virtual plank across a 30-foot deep pit can go into freak-out mode when asked to jump off, according to researcher Jesse Fox, VHIL's lab manager. Fox guards the subjects with outstretched arms, to keep them from flailing around and staggering into walls as they attempt to grab on to objects as their brain experiences plunging, she said. Many people won't even attempt to jump, she added.

"In online environments, the avatar is not simply a uniform that is worn, the avatar is our entire self-representation," according to Nick Yee, a researcher at Stanford's Department of Communication who has collaborated with Bailenson in the lab.

Virtual life is powerfully seductive, Yee said. For some adults and for teens, the virtual world can be a way to get away from life's psychological stressors. There is the possibility of obsessive use in the same way as other compulsive behaviors, such as with shopping or sex. People who enter into this world can get empowerment. That empowerment can seem disproportionately seductive, especially with teenagers, he said.

"The virtual world becomes a crutch. ... It starts looking like the online gaming problem," he said.

Yee and Bailenson found that people will conform to the expectations and stereotypes of the identity of their avatars. Average-looking people in real life with more attractive Second Life avatars are willing to have closer interpersonal space and share more information than if they have shorter, less attractive avatars.

Likewise, as might be expected, they received a more favorable response. And people with taller avatars negotiated more aggressively during negotiations both in-life and later in real life, Bailenson said.

Yee dubbed the phenomenon the "Proteus Effect," after the Greek god Proteus, who had the ability to take on many self-representations. So too, in Second Life, people can conform to the behavior they perceive others would expect them to have, Yee said.

That transformation takes place quickly. Yee and Bailenson saw that when people had taller avatars, they negotiated more aggressively within five minutes of immersion, he said. How long those effects last in the real world are not yet known, Yee said.

But some people don't want to look like someone — both men and women — are remaking their avatars in their own real-life image. One group within Second Life formed an Ugly Avatars group.

"This is a group for those guys who have chosen not to look like an 8-foot-tall mountain of muscle or for those women that don't inflate their breasts to epic sizes. You don't necessarily have to be ugly to join this group. This is moreso a group for those people who have created an avatar for themselves that is unique, that doesn't necessarily fit into any of the SL clichés," the group's page notes.

Patricia Levinson, 53, a senior technical writer at Sun Microsystems, Inc., in Menlo Park, uses Second Life strictly for work-related pursuits. She wasn't comfortable with the idealized, off-the-shelf versions of avatars that permeate Second Life, so she altered her avatar to have smaller breasts and more weight, she said. But now her avatar is in the process of a makeover by a professional at Linden Labs — for a fee. Levinson wants her avatar to look like herself, wrinkles, body shape and all, she said.

"It felt dishonest," she said of the idealized avatar. "Second Life is a beautiful-person place. I've never seen a disabled person in Second Life. I don't see anyone who isn't tremendously successful," she said.

Levinson, like would-be soccer mom Marwah, sees other barriers to immersing herself in Second Life.

Aside from the technology challenges — there is a steep learning curve to mastering the program — for persons not prone to fantasy, Second Life can seem cartoonish.

"As a child, I played with dolls for hours. I can't get past the feeling that I'm holding a doll — that you're moving an avatar around in a virtual dollhouse. I'm not a fantasy person; I'm a real-life person. There's an inherent conflict for me in Second Life because I'm so reality based," the Mountain View resident said.

It also raises questions about how virtual worlds intersect with real life and what drives people to spend time in the immersive experience, she said.

Her interest in Second Life was piqued after reading a 2007 Wall Street Journal article about a man who spent up to 14 hours daily in Second Life with his more attractive, vastly more successful avatar self — and with a beautiful avatar wife — while his real wife was watching television in the living room. That blurring of the line between reality and the virtual world intrigued Levinson, who has a psychology and education background and whose work revolves around technical-communication opportunities in virtual worlds.

"Could you have a virtual relationship in Second Life and would it be cheating?"

"The psych major in me wanted to find out what this is about. ... What is propelling people in real life to go and find a second life? I don't know the answer to that. Has something in our culture changed?" she said.

The cultural shift taking place through virtual reality will continue to accelerate, Bailenson said. Already, technologies are emerging that will allow avatars to move in nuanced ways that can mimic facial expressions and body language. Bailenson took part in research that mapped facial expressions on avatars while they worked, to predict when an accident would occur as a result of fatigue.

Because the instantaneous quality of human interaction is masked by the avatar, virtual life gives people more of a chance to think before saying things, and potentially, to program their actions to be different from how they are in real life, Levinson said.

Marwah doesn't trust that illusion. The same cautions apply as those used in chat rooms, she said.

"The trust element is not there. You don't know who you are talking to, and that applies even more in Second Life. You could be anyone dressed up. You can be a wolf in sheep's clothing, literally," she said.

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