



If Second Life isn't a game, what is it?

Many have struggled with how to characterize 3-D online virtual world

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Let's start with clarifying what Second Life is.

Second Life is a 3-D online virtual world where avatars do the kind of stuff real people do in real life: Buy stuff. Sell stuff. Gamble. Listen to music. Buy property. Flirt. Play games. Watch movies. Have sex.

But is it a game?

The mainstream press has struggled with how to characterize Second Life. The term "3-D online virtual world" doesn't roll off the tongue as easily as the term "game." And it's a whole lot harder to get in a headline. But what is it, really?

Linden Lab, the company that created the platform that is Second Life, is emphatic that their creation is not a game. "There is no manufactured conflict, no set objective," says spokesperson Catherine Smith. "It's an entirely open-ended experience."

Second Life does bear some resemblance to the "Sim City" and "Sims" franchises from Maxis and Electronic Arts. Players build and design a city in "Sim City," and in "The Sims," players control characters in day-to-day activities. There are no monsters to kill, no real objective to speak of. But the grow-your-own quality of these games resonated with players. "The Sims" is the best-selling PC game of all time.

Second Life is also compared to Blizzard Entertainment's "World of Warcraft." Unless you've been living under a rock, you've undoubtedly heard about this record-breaking massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

The goal is simple: Players enter a multiplayer online world and go on quests alone or with other people. You play until you can't level up anymore. Plenty of addicted players hit that ceiling quickly, so much like someone who devours a book in three hours and can't bear to part with the characters, "WoW" players simply go back to the beginning and start over.

To feed the insatiable demand for more characters, more levels and more weapons, Blizzard employs a flotilla of designers, artists, animators and programmers. But even "WoW" has its limits.

Pushing up on the boundaries

"There are two types of people," says Beth Goza, known as Kealiaha Trudeau in Second Life. "Those who think it's fine to live within the world of developers' imaginations, and those that push up on the boundaries."

Goza falls into the latter camp. She's played "WoW," and is still an avid fan. But she wanted to customize her game-playing experience, and she knew other people felt the same way. "The point of 'World of Warcraft' is not to hang out and dance in a pub, but people do it," she says.

So in 2006, Goza, who was working for Linden and spending plenty of time in Second Life already, bought an island that she named Djork (No, the "j" is not a typo. And yes, she gets it.).

She turned it into a sweeping, palm-tree studded oasis for her friends and Second Life newbies. She and friend Lucius Templar created a movie theater, an art gallery, an amusement park and a shopping center for Djork. The residents who visit each month — and there are thousands of them — spend time snorkeling, shopping, fishing and belly-dancing.

The genius of user-created content

It's true Second Life lacks a designed conflict and end objective. But the real difference between "World of Warcraft," "The Sims" or any other game Second Life is compared to is this: Linden does not create the content. The users, called "residents," build everything.

The lodge with the llamas outside? Created by a resident. The cool animation that can change your awkward, new-avatar gait into the feline prowl of a supermodel? Created by a resident. The lush, vast "Lord of the Rings"-like island of Svarga? Created by a resident. And what's more, these residents pay for the privilege to build these things in-world.

Why? Motivations vary. For Goza, Djork was a way to take her mind off her mother's illness. It was also a way to gather up her favorite things in Second Life and make them permanent.

"Content can be very transient in Second Life," she says. "One of my favorite islands was an amusement park, and one day I went and it was gone."

For love or money?

Permanence in Second Life has a price: The island cost her \$1,300, and there's a monthly \$195 upkeep charge. Despite this, Goza has no interest in trying to recoup her expenses. She provides all of the experiences on Djork free-of-charge. For Goza, Djork is her entertainment, her labor of love. But still, not exactly a game.

For many residents, the motivation to create stuff in Second Life is less altruistic. I landed in Second Life clad in default clothing and sporting a mortifying pink hairdo. My avatar walked like someone who'd just gotten off a horse.

Luckily, there's a whole in-world cottage industry dedicated to giving you the avatar of your dreams. Or, at least one that doesn't scream "pathetic newbie." The pigtails that I bought for my avatar set me back 200 Lindens, or a little less than \$1. The glittery clogs on my size-zero feet cost me 400 Lindens. But at least I fit in enough to leave Orientation Island.

Once you've personalized your avatar, you're going to need something to do, and there is an unending supply of activities — both fee-based and free — in Second Life. You've probably heard about the more prurient experiences in Second Life, and there's no denying that gambling and sex litter the in-world landscape. But if you're looking for good, clean fun, Second Life has plenty to offer.

Socializing holds great appeal

Chenelle Bremont, known in-world as Tinkar Daligidig, visits Second Life regularly to hang out with friends. She's also an in-world DJ with Phreak Radio. "For me, [Second Life] is a game because it's a form of entertainment," says Bremont, who is married and gainfully employed in real life. Like her avatar, she is dark-haired, blue-eyed and pretty. And like her avatar, Bremont has plenty of friends.

The appeal for Bremont, and many other Second Life residents, is social. It's frighteningly easy to summon a group of pals to hear a blues artist or check out a movie. When was the last time you were able to plan a real-life group outing that didn't require about 45 e-mails and half a dozen phone calls?

The number of people who "live" in Second Life is open to some debate. Linden, which tracks in-world stats in real-time on the secondlife.com Web site, says that the world has over 4 million residents, although some dismiss that number as inflated, since some folks sign up for free accounts and never come back.

Jumping on the bandwagon

No matter: The population growth of Second Life and the real money changing hands has convinced big corporations to set up camp — or island — in Second Life. American Apparel has an in-world shop to sell hoodies and t-shirts to comfort-craving residents. Toyota's Scion division built an in-world dealership and driving track to let residents check out cars.

"Second Life is not a game to Scion, it's more of a community," says company spokesperson Allison Takahashi. "It's a great opportunity for Scion to interact with these communities and reach its target audience of trendsetters."

One way to reach the hyper-wired residents of Second Life is to build a game in-world. And even if Second Life itself isn't a game in the strictest sense, games in Second Life are very popular. "Tringo," a fast-paced fusion of Tetris and bingo, did so well in-world that it was turned into a Game Boy Advance game in the real world.

"At one point, 'Tringo' games were one-quarter of all events going on in Second Life," says Wagner James Au, author of the blog "[New World Notes](#)." "People were worried that people were playing 'Tringo' too much."

Games within a...game?

Since many residents have played games before, most are comfortable and familiar with game mechanics like using the arrow keys to move around or in-world chat to communicate. So when Universal Pictures came to NBC's digital innovation team looking for a way to promote its forthcoming "Smokin' Aces" movie, a game seemed like a great idea.

(MSNBC is a joint Microsoft - NBC Universal venture.)

The game pitted residents against each other in their quest to become the ultimate hired assassin. Players had a hit list and weaponry, and the prize was 1 million Lindens, the largest payout in Second Life history. To hook players, NBC released new weapons throughout the 10-day game period.

Within 18 hours of the game launch, residents hacked the weaponry cache to give themselves a leg up. But rather than go after the hackers, NBC decided to see the violation as a form of flattery. "We didn't pay them to hack it, but we appreciated the feedback from people who took time to crack our code," says producer Randall Craycraft.

NBC was humbled with "Smokin' Aces," but Craycraft says clients both within the company and outside it are clamoring to do more in "Second Life." They recognize, he says, that this is the new medium, much like Web was just 10 years ago.

Second Life isn't the first virtual world to exist and it's not the only one out there. Competitors and imitators have rushed to cash in on The Next Big Thing. And many involved with "Second Life" predict that this is it, the next stage, the "new Internet."

As the technology improves — performance issues and frequent maintenance outages are a common grouse among Second Life residents — more people will be using these virtual worlds for all kinds of reasons: Education, collaboration, research and — of course — entertainment. As that happens, what to call Second Life will be a moot point.

No matter what you call it — a game, not a game, waste of time — Second Life is not a passing fad. Universities and serious research organizations are using the simulated environment to perform inexpensive experiments. Some believe the future of work will be modeled after Second Life, with avatars from far-flung locales meeting up in a virtual world to make real-world decisions. Lofty plans, big ideas.

And plenty of fabulous outfits for my avatar.

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