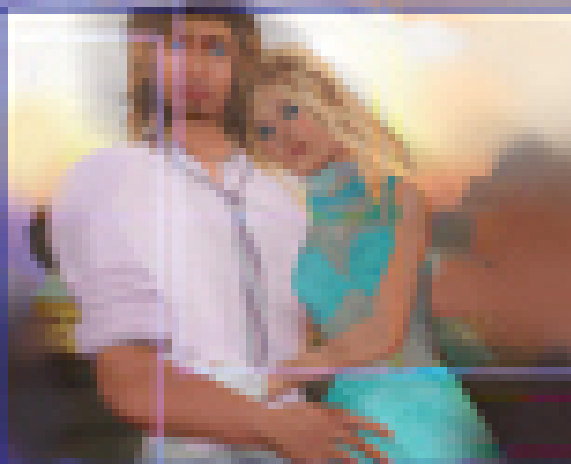
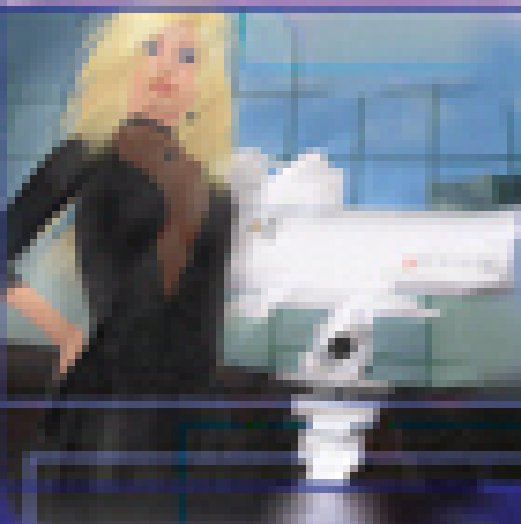


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Second Life, Media, and the Other Society



SECOND LIFE: AN INTRODUCTION

“*This is Major Tom to ground control, I’m stepping through the door.*’ When I was little, I really wanted to adventure into space...I can still remember lying inside a wardrobe box in my basement, ready to lift off, surrounded by knobs and buttons I had drawn around me...”

—Philip Linden (Rosedale)

Today, Philip Linden might tell you that you are less than a minute away from a rocket blast into space. That might be true, if you are a member of the virtual world Second Life, a gaming community that has more to do with exploration and experimentation than actually defeating an alien monster. In Second Life, you can create an alien, and you can even build that spaceship. Last night, I voyaged to Mars through the inner space of my computer. My avatar, Soni, was my representation, yet through my eyes and ears I traveled through space. When I arrived on Mars, and went inside the space station, the view reminded me of a scene from *Total Recall* (1990), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, a sci-fi movie that blurs the line between reality and implanted memories. Unlike a real voyage to Mars, it was a quick teleport home to my residence in Second Life. I arranged a few things in my house, and had a late night dance with my husband on top of our rooftop. Okay, sounds a bit corny, but I am among the hordes of residents living in two worlds—real life (RL) and Second Life (SL). I am a professor in reality and SL fashion designer with several stores virtually, and my husband loves to landscape between our three ocean-front properties and his skybox house. Near one of my houses, my neighbor is a prayer and worship leader, with weekly gatherings on her property. Sometimes, she arranges for live musicians to come and sing at her place. Typically about 20 avatars from Australia, England, Canada and the United States drop in to listen and dance. Among those I have met in SL include artists, fashion designers, film makers, nightclub deejays, musicians, television show hosts, pastors, and educators. Some have similar occupations in real life as they do in their second life. Others are computer programmers and engineers, waitresses, nurses, retirees, and housewives in actuality compared to their occupations outside of Second Life. A number of universities and colleges are represented within Second Life, and some students get their first taste of online communities through courses taught virtually. Perhaps that is why you are reading this book; maybe this is your introduction to Second Life. You might scoff at the idea of being an avatar, and strolling through virtual daisies. But whether you participate or not, know that Second Life and other virtual communities are impacting our lives, and changing the way we understand the role of media.

Second Life is a digital culture that competes increasingly with real-life media and society and challenges the way we participate in media making and all forms of mediated entertainment. For the most part, Second Life provides an alternate space of communication and interaction within a mediated environment, one that nearly mirrors the real world in almost every way. An interesting read is *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age* (Thomas, 2007) that investigates how emotions are evoked through digital culture, and how the Internet shapes new media literacy. In this book, Angela Thomas (2007) shares the variety of ways that youth communicate and role-play across the Internet, and has been a regular participant and lecturer on Second Life. Thomas relates how Second Life, and games like it, have the potential to challenge our identity and social conventions.

A number of scholars have sought to identify the ills and benefits of the gaming world. T. L. Taylor (2006) provides an overview of the social issues that developed in the early online game culture, and Richard Bartle (2003) reviews how design has played a social and political role in virtual world development. The tendency, however, has been to study the social impact of the Internet from a real-world perspective, rather than from the vantage point of participants immersed within the game culture. Authors such as Philip Howard & Steve Jones (2004) of *Society Online* indicate that the Internet is changing the way we communicate in our life in every way imaginable. In *The Internet in Everyday Life*, Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman (2002) review the Web's social influence on daily life, as we have come to depend on it for home and business communication, with our computers always on, and email accounts always ready to be checked for new messages.

In a groundbreaking book, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2008) takes a look from inside the gaming world, writing an ethnographical account of his experiences in Second Life. In a great sense, Second Life offers members an opportunity to examine themselves in response to circumstances apart from their daily life routine. They can reinvent their identities within this mediated virtual space through their participation in the game. To many, Second Life, unlike World of Warcraft, is not a game, but a community of residents who work and play in this second space, which actually exists, but is accessed online through the computer. Second Life is a medium that provides immediate interaction among members. This book is the first to explore the breadth of Second Life and its social and technological implications on media viewing, listening, and creation. It begins with a historical overview of virtual communities, and positions Second Life within the genre of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG). More significantly, this book positions Second Life as a medium for entertainment, information, socialization,

business, and life in general—not unlike the television and Internet.

Second Life has become the bridge between real and second life, perhaps offering a glimpse into the future of media and society. Given the number of participants (more than 14 million registered accounts worldwide) and the growing number of real-world businesses in Second Life, it has become more than a game for many participants—it is a lifestyle. It has found itself woven into the plots of American television, and it is quickly growing beyond its once cult status. As of 2009, among Second Life's biggest competitors were the now defunct *There* with only 500,000 users, the widely popular Asian platform China's *Soft-World* (2007 release), and New York City-based *Area/Code* (2005 release), which engaged residents citywide in the virtual game. *There.com*'s user base skewed a bit younger, between 13 to 26 years old. Alycia de Mesa (2007), explains, *There* was "originally intended for a tech-friendly crowd in their late 20s to early 30s," but its younger demographic has more to do with its world relating to a younger generation who had "latched onto the social networking phenomenon. Second Life, on the other hand, is attracting users more interested in creating a persona that diverges greatly from their real-life one."

Within Second Life's short history (since 2003), it has moved from game status to that of a virtual community, and now is studied for its societal influence and its implications on our mediated future in America as well as internationally. Second Life does not replicate real life, although its members participate in activities that simulate real life: shopping, dancing, studying, worshipping, building, performing and creating relationships and families. It might be difficult to comprehend Second Life without first having become an avatar, flying through a virtual sunset, swimming in a magnificent blue ocean without getting wet, building the home of your dreams, walking through a Van Gogh painting or a Ray Bradbury book, attending a physics lecture as a troll, and making friends across the world. Second Life is real life, with a better graphics card and without some of the human physical limitations. Second Life is revolutionizing education, putting a new spin on online shopping, and creating new venues for live music and theater.

Paid members have land ownership and building rights, and can rent their properties to non-paid members. Second Life members might be classified as residents or explorers. As explorers, some avatars merely enjoy the scenery, educational opportunities, and the interaction with others. As residents, members build and design properties for personal or commercial purposes. For many residents, there is a desire to designate a particular place as home. As in real life, participants admit a sense of comfort by having a place to entertain company or return to before they sign off for the night. Some members have even tucked their avatars in bed for the night, and signed off from there.

As quirky as this sounds, Second Life triggers real-life emotions and connections for many residents, and that is partly the reason why so many avatars spend so much time customizing their appearances and their homes. New members, awkward in appearance, are called noobies (*newbies*, *noobs*, etc.). Second Life mentors and orientation sites are set up to assist new members in their transition into the mainland.

The means of transportation is flying, although cars, airplanes, blimps, and air balloons offer alternative ways of traveling across regions fairly close by to each other. Teleporting from one location to another is the most popular means of crossing long distances, or moving up and down floors in a building, such as a shopping mall, business headquarters, or apartment complex. The Second Life grid, as one massive entity, is comparable to a large metropolitan area, although it is broken up into various terrains. At any one moment when 40,000 to 60,000 users of the total SL membership are signed into the game, Second Life might appear barely populated because not all residents are logged on at the same time. The SL world itself is quite physically expansive. Many dance clubs and malls may be vacant at that moment, while many of the other hundreds of sites have 20 to 40 avatars interacting with each other. On occasion, Second Life festivals and special activities, such as large concerts and art exhibitions, might accommodate between 60 to 100 people in one place without a major overload to a region (experienced as lag, a slowing down of movement by avatars and cutting out of a music stream, for example).

Second Life has a listing of top sites to explore while online, and these showplaces include museums, art exhibits, dance clubs, parks, educational sites, and so much more. Some of the best moments in Second Life are those where members communicate with each other in voice or text, simply finding a quiet spot to share thoughts regarding real (their first life) and second life. You might be on deck of a yacht, chilling, enjoying the blue sky and open ocean, sitting around with a few friends talking, laughing, and taking some time away from the hectic moments of real life.

In this second world, the Linden Lab staff adopts the surname of Linden. Similarly, when people choose to join Second Life, in a sense they become part of the Linden family. Members can choose from a series of last names with first names being theirs to create. The how and why of Second Life begins with Philip Linden, a.k.a. Philip Rosedale in RL, inventor of Linden Lab, of which Second Life is a major part. As a physics major in college, Rosedale toyed with the idea of virtual communities early on before his career began. In 1999, during an interview, he said he had dreamed of space travel as a child and of building rockets into his 30s. One day he figured out that he wanted to create space, and travel into the innermost world of virtuality: "Now, 5 years

later, I am convinced that in a strong sense I have really achieved what I had dreamed of as a kid...The way we did this was by building the space, rather than the spaceship” (Linden, 2005). He continued, “Instead of trying to get out of orbit, we at Linden Lab instead built the place that such a ship would travel into.” Adding, Linden explains, “I think that the most compelling aspects of space exploration—the things that drew us all to it as kids—are in Second Life, or even in some sense *are* Second Life” (Linden, 2005).

That would be his space exploration. Rosedale describes Second Life as a 3D interactive online world where people simply build things. In a Stanford University interview, he explained that “you can actually walk around in [it and it] has the unusual property that everything made in it can be changed by you and everybody else that lives there. That makes it very different from an online video game...that everything you encounter you can’t change” (Wyndowe & Vasconcellos, 2006). In 2006, Rosedale stated that SL was expanding by 10% monthly; at that time it was 90 square miles, nearly twice the size of San Francisco, or nearly the size of Amsterdam, with the density of Tokyo—and to operate a virtual city of this size it takes approximately 4,000 server machines (2006). Linden Lab, although based in San Francisco, has approximately 250 employees around the world. It was founded in 1999, after Rosedale left RealNetworks as Chief Technology Officer (Linden, 2005). He was 27 years old, and was about to launch his dream company, Linden Lab, without much of a clue on what he really wanted to do at the time. With several ideas spinning around in his thoughts, Second Life emerged, and revolutionized the concept of virtual community. Rosedale has earned numerous honors and awards for his virtual work with Linden Lab, with much of the company’s energy focused on the residential, commercial and educational aspects of Second Life.

The inspiration for Second Life as a “building community” came when Rosedale was concluding a presentation to his board of directors. A demo of the game on the projector screen in the board room had concluded (Wyndowe & Vasconcellos, 2006). The idea behind SL, at that point, was similar to many of the games of the era, a bit of action, chase and shooting, plus a mix of building. Rosedale decided to let the live cam stay on the workers behind the scenes, with staff playing around creating stuff in the other room; the board members looked on with fascination. Rosedale explained, “It was at that moment that we realized, no, no, no, the thing here, the thing about this Metaverse, is that you can make things there with other people. You can have this collaborative, creative experience that you just can’t have in the real world...unless you’re extraordinarily lucky...” (Wyndowe & Vasconcellos, 2006).

In 2008, the same year that Rosedale announced he would step down as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to spend more time on design issues, Linden's founder was honored at the 59th Annual Technology & Engineering Emmy Awards. The announcement was made on March 14, 2008, the birth date of his avatar, Philip Linden (born in RL on September 1, 1968). Two years prior, he received *Wired's* Rave Award for Innovation in Business, on behalf of Linden Lab. In *Wired*, he said, "I'm not building a game. I'm building a new continent." Significant to that process, he added, Linden Lab is creating a social and economic infrastructure so that it can sustain itself.

In 2007, he was listed among *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World (Vega, 2007). Rosedale's love for science and art fuels Second Life and this generates a unique mix of residents and ideas, a dreamy twist of imagination, theory and reality. Wagner James Au (2008), noted columnist on Second Life and former Linden employee, wrote on the early days of Second Life; and in his book, *The Making of Second Life*, he describes Rosedale as a rare person grounded in science but open to the world before him, and all its possibilities. The book offers a number of anecdotal stories that provide a glimpse into SL culture. One of Second Life's well-received large-scale in-world exhibits was the *Burning Man* festival in 2008 inspired by the real world gathering in 1999 outside the Bay Area in Black Rock Desert that once impressed Rosedale long before Second Life was conceived (Au, 2008).

This book *Second Life, Media and the Other Society* provides an introduction to Second Life, and how it impacts society, with a particular focus on how it functions as a medium for residents and how SL media operates within this virtual community spilling over into the real world. As with every medium, how media function must be contextualized in the society of which they are apart.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the entrance of Second Life as a virtual community in the world of online gaming and a progression from what is called *The Victorian Internet*, the idea that early technologies like the telegraph were predecessors to the wireless transmission of information. In the latter half of the twentieth century, these wireless technologies cut across borders and territories, not always to the preference of governmental leaders. Artists, educators, and laypeople would form the beginning of unique virtual communities beginning in the 1980s. Today, Second Life is a virtual social network platform that allows its residents to create alternate identities, drawing from real and idealized life. One might envision a public sphere, where individuals often form memberships within community groups of like interests, perhaps gather-

ing in public forums at a virtual nightclub, café, office, or beach. The possibilities are endless when in avatar form. Howard Rheingold (1998) discusses the emergence of the virtual community, as created through the Internet, and Sherry Turkle's work (1997; 2005) has affirmed that these mediated spaces have created communities that span across real and virtual life.

Chapter 2 illustrates how Second Life serves to extend the notion of social networking within a virtual community of residents. In Taiwan, Internet cafés draw people away from their homes into social settings. In the USA, although Americans retreat to their computers in their individualized spaces, they have an opportunity to communicate to people beyond their neighborhoods and workplaces based on varied interests. Christine Rosen's "egocasting" (2004/2005, p. 51) refers to various ways individualism and personalities are displayed "in the multiple media around us." MySpace, Facebook, and a plethora of profile management sites allow users to define and extend their list of friends, and present themselves in unique ways. From these platforms, viewers can send instant messages to other members, keeping in contact with daily life happenings among their circle of friends. Second Life is the ultimate social network that allows members to interact through daily conversations within a variety of settings reality inspired or imagined. Educators, computer programmers, students, media specialists, journalists and others gather in-world via specialty groups. Other times, this mixed cast of characters arrive at the same in-world destination for a public concert or news event.

Chapter 3 explores how identity is constructed in Second Life, as part fantasy and part reality. For some, Second Life offers a complete escape from reality, while others create their avatars to resemble their real appearance and personality. Some members have more than one avatar, with each expressing a unique side of their perceived, imagined or real identity. Second Life allows members to play with their identity in a safe environment that provides for nondisclosure and experimentation, but in an altered state of reality. Many authors, artists and educators prefer not to remain anonymous. Second Life can become as socially real as an individual desires. The boundaries between real and second life are individually determined. Identity can be expressed in Second Life through one's avatar form, gender, skin color, and fashion choices, as well as by the groups they have joined in-world. Virtual spaces are constructed to support real and alternate identities. This chapter introduces how community has been maintained and extended in the virtual environment through individuals assuming roles, perceived or fabricated.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to The Linden Dollar—the currency exchanged in Second Life. One hundred Lindens approximate four dollars in U.S. currency. Reuters News Service (2007) reporting on trends in Second Life, revealed in

January 2007 that 85% of SL consumers (a mean of 33 years old RL) spend more than \$250 Lindens per month on clothing. Status is driven by one's ability to afford the right skin, shape and clothes, and even the right house in Second Life. A number of corporations advertise and have building space in Second Life, from soft drink companies to perfume companies to car dealerships to record labels; even adult entertainment companies and sports teams are represented in-world. Second Life is not utopia; some might cynically describe it as a brave new space that encourages exploitation as well as experimentation. For those who desire to work in Second Life, a number of service jobs, from sweeping floors to greeting customers to fashion modeling, to dancing at adult clubs, help members earn precious Lindens. This chapter examines the consumer culture of Second Life.

Chapter 5 explores Second Life as a new frontier, where members can claim space within various territories or regions. A spin around SL will introduce the novice to regions based after movies, music, and nostalgia; it is a playground for tourists and adventurers, and a sandbox for new world developers. Land sales fuel the SL economy for the most part. Real estate is the number one industry in this second space. Many participants desire to own a home in Second Life, and to do so they must be a paid member. Others rent condos or apartment suites. Some without homes admit that they feel unsettled or restless without a space of their own. With a designated home base, you can be assured that you begin at a "safe" location the next time you launch a session. For others, Second Life is an adventure without any particular destination. This chapter examines the meaning of space and territory as it relates to establishing a sense of home and shared space in Second Life.

Chapter 6 investigates the social and technical side of in-world advertising, from billboards to broadcast commercials. This chapter examines how advertisers have targeted the needs and wants of an emerging digital consumer, and provides an overview of trends and technology that encourage consumer participation. The Internet is a place for people to experiment with products and media through virtual platforms. The Internet has facilitated viral marketing in virtual communities like YouTube, mainly through commercials that rely on good storytelling techniques and their delivery systems. Storytelling as a marketing consideration has been integral to drawing the consumer into the Internet, and particularly virtual communities. Plastered in shopping malls and nightclubs, and sometimes un-zoned residential neighborhoods, virtual billboards call attention to avatar products and services. Numerous advertising agencies and marketing services are available in Second Life; some of which are extensions from real firms. This chapter investigates the marketing realities and potential of Second Life.

Chapter 7 reconsiders the concept of learning virtually across the globe. One of the biggest industries in Second Life is education. Educational institutions are seeking new ways to teach and to attract students. This chapter takes a look at how learning is conducted in-world, and the impact from bringing students into a virtual classroom. A multitude of groups exist in Second Life that allow for educators to collaborate and discuss real issues in a second learning space. Moreover, museum exhibits and art galleries contribute to an atmosphere of life-long learning. This chapter was guest-authored by Nanci Burk, Ph.D., resident faculty member at Glendale Community College in Glendale, Arizona. She spent a year-long sabbatical within Second Life exploring its use among educators, including surveying and interviewing them. She teaches at Glendale, a campus that has taken the lead in exploring the potential of virtual worlds for enhancing learning and using technology to connect students to different cultures across the world.

Chapter 8 lets us listen into Second Life. A big part of this virtual community is the use of radio and streaming of music that is performed in Second Life. When Second Life hosted its 5th anniversary celebrations, it featured non-stop live music over a few days from musicians who regularly performed in the virtual world. Nearly every day, live music is performed in SL at a variety of venues, and many of these performers have developed their own fan bases. Representatives from RL and SL indie labels, as well as from major record labels, work from inside and organize events, anywhere from occasionally to routinely. SL Live Radio is one station devoted to the virtual indie musician. Some musicians double as nightclub disc jockeys; when they are not singing, they are spinning tunes. Nightclubs attract large crowds on weekends and certain weeknights on occasion. This chapter focuses on the world of music in Second Life, and its social and economic consequences.

Chapter 9 is a sneak preview into what avatars are watching on their virtual television sets. Treet-TV, formerly Second Life Cable Network (SLCN), broadcasts within Second Life a variety of topical shows, from fashion to music to architecture. Beyond that, network television is making the connection between real and virtual spaces, increasingly, as an effort to market their programs and expand their audience base. On Wednesday, October 24, 2007, CBS invited viewers into Second Life's CSI's Crime Lab. The network episode "Down the Rabbit Hole" would end with a cliff-hanger, inviting its audience to figure "who did it?" by solving the crime in Second Life. Throughout the show, Second Life avatars (70–80% more females than males) engaged in the process of crime-solving while watching the show. This chapter also examines the making of machinima, which are films produced in and about Second Life, noting the 2008 Home Box Office release of *Molotov Alva and His Search*

for the Creator: A Second Life Odyssey originally titled *My Second Life: The Video Diaries of Molotov Alva*.

Chapter 10 reports on the role of print media journalism in Second Life. Real-world news networks and newspapers are increasingly making their presence known within Second Life, and now compete with independent news organizations that reside within this digital landscape. In-world newspapers are often the first to report on how corporate media from the outside are experimenting within Second Life, and the success of those ventures. They even critique Linden Lab policies. News companies like Reuters, at one point, had reporters assigned as avatars in Second Life to report on the Linden economy and social barometer of virtual reality. A number of newspapers and magazines have surfaced in Second Life, from those covering RL politics to in-world lifestyle news. This chapter reviews what is being reported about avatars and their communities within Second Life.

Chapter 11 deals with the darker side of Second Life, looking at issues of sex, violence and crime within virtual communities. For some, violence and sex is a part of their role-play activities. Others take violence to the mainland or private regions, resulting in some residents reporting incidents related to grievers pointing guns at members, attempting to rob or harass them. The Linden Lab maintains a community police blotter listing criminal activity and sanctions on a regular basis. Some advertisements promoting the sale of weapons have depicted images of scantily clad women holding high-powered machine guns. Firing ranges are set up by members in designated private or public areas in Second Life. A number of public venues post signs warning “No drama” and “No weapons.” Add to that, “drug stores” sell scripts to avatars to simulate the effects of illegal drugs. Residents can experiment with sex, violence and crime in this mediated space without the conventional consequences, meanwhile challenging certain social conventions within virtual media.

Chapter 12 considers diversity within virtual communities, with Second Life comprised of an international mix of residents. Residents construct homes, meeting spaces, and their own avatars (and often multiple avatars), while extending their self and community identities beyond limitations of race, ethnicity and gender. In this chapter, opportunities in-world for the disabled population are presented for consideration as well, for diversity is a concept that needs to be expanded in both real and virtual worlds. A growing transgendered community is apparent in Second Life, with groups established such as Transgender Denmark, Femme by Choice, Transchristianism Othersexed in SL, Omnisexual Beings and so forth. A number of scholars have discussed how television has shaped the image of the queer community (Fejes &

Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1983, for example). One would be hard pressed to find an equivalent literature base devoted to new media. At least 10% of the female avatars are actually male members. Certain looks tend to dominate the landscape. The sexualization of the female form is also examined, as well as questions of race and representation in this not so utopian society.

Chapter 13 examines the concept of spirituality in Second Life, particularly seeking out those engaged with in-world prayer, evangelism, and missions. Nearly every religion is represented in Second Life, from Mormons, to Wiccan, to Buddhists to Pentecostals. Certain regions have become designated as religious sites by residents, and draw members into activities and fellowship. Some members are hostile to the establishment of religious communities, and some worship regions have had to contend with griefers—avatars that intentionally disrupt a meeting for example through indecent language or actions and perhaps even cause damage to a region through scripting viruses. This chapter examines prayer and ceremony in Second Life, and their impact on the possibilities of interfaith activities and tolerance among groups. Second Life, as a medium, is considered a power evangelistic tool, more so than other media, to many who practice religion in-world.

Chapter 14 concludes the book with some speculation about the future of virtual worlds. Second Life increasingly dominates the virtual landscape, and has been able to cross international borders commercially, allowing global businesses to be developed and relationships to be formed. Based on Linden statistics, Second Life's economy is thriving. Add to that, there is an abundance of virtual worlds directed at children. How long before the distinction between virtual and real is nonexistent in education, commerce and daily life? This chapter attempts to provide a social snapshot of the future regarding virtual technology, with SL as a metaphor. Mark Deuze (2007) reminds us, "[B]ecause of the pervasiveness of media in everyday life and the multitasking way we engage with those media, more than half our media use 'disappears' when we are asked about it." He directs us toward the wisdom of futurist Alvin Toffler, with words written nearly 30 years ago: "This invisibility of making and using media simultaneously can be set against the increasing invisibility of media in everyday life." Understanding how Second Life is intersecting with our real lives, although crudely at this point, might give us a glimpse into social, political and economical dynamics of the mediated future.

An epilogue follows, that highlights an interview with notable author Wagner James Au of *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (HarperCollins, 2008). He was there when it all started—on Second Life. So, it seems fitting to allow him some final observations on the evolving virtual world dynamics, and offer us some predictions toward the future as well.