The Meaning of (Second) Life

*Y*ou keep hearing about it in the news. Reporters flying around a digital world talking about the strange things happening there. Politicians meeting their constituents in digital bodies. Music events with virtual bands playing for virtual audiences. Companies such as IBM, Reuters, American Apparel, and Nike have all staked their claim to open digital storefronts.

This is the world of Second Life (SL). A world of avatars and virtual landscapes where anything can happen and usually does. Whether you're a student taking online classes, a budding fashion designer looking for an opportunity to show off your latest threads, or just someone who likes to dance the night away without paying a cover charge, Second Life has something to offer. We'll show you how to get in there, get started, and get up to speed — so read on!

When One Life Isn't Enough: Explaining Second Life

Most of us have enough going in our First Lives (translation, our real lives) to wonder why anyone would need a second one. Running between meetings, trying to keep up with friends, and the occasional entertainment we might have time for seems to be enough to keep us busy morning to night. Rather than thinking about Second Life as just one more new technology to keep up with, though, think about it as a way to simplify much of what you already do. Instead of driving between meetings, you could fly.

Instead of making five phone calls to organize your friends for tonight's trip to the dance club, you could be sending them teleport requests to join you at the latest hip spot. Forget waiting in line to buy concert tickets; with Second Life, you can attend a live concert any time you'd like without paying ten bucks for a beverage.

So how does Second Life work? There are some basic elements to this cyber-world. After you understand how they work, you'll be able to dive right in and start having fun.

- ✔ **Account types:** Verified and unverified: If you associate a credit card or Paypal account with your account you'll be listed as verified, that is you proved who you were when you created your account. Basic and Premium: Basic accounts are free. If you own land you'll pay a monthly fee and be moved to a premium account. For more on account types, see Chapter 3.

- ✔ **Avatars:** An *avatar* is your virtual body in Second Life. You could be a bombshell, decked out in the latest Gucci knock-offs, or a dinosaur wagging your tail, as shown in Figure 1-1. In Second Life, the only limits to your appearance are the limits of your imagination, your time, and your wallet. If you can think it, you can be it. For info about customizing your avatar, jump to Chapter 5.

- ✔ **Moving:** Second Life allows you to get around in lots of ways. You can fly without without wings (see Figure 1-2), run, walk, drive a car, or teleport from place to place.

Figure 1-1: In Second Life you can lounge on the beach anytime you feel like getting a little sun.

✔ **Chatting:** Second Life offers lots of different ways to communicate with fellow residents. You can send Instant Messages, text chat with those around you (as shown in Figure 1-3), or even use your voice with a microphone. For more details about how to chat it up with your Second Life cronies, see Chapter 6.

✔ **L$ (virtual money):** Second Life has its own economy with a currency called the *Linden (L$)*. You can purchase Lindens to buy virtual schwag from other folks, buy a house, cruise in your dream car, and so on. But here's the best part: If you start a business or make money some other way in Second Life, you can exchange your L$ for cold hard cash. For more info about the Second Life economy, check out Chapter 10.

✔ **Building your world:** Everything in Second Life is built by Second Life residents. Every shopping mall (see Figure 1-4), every water slide, every awesome pair of sunglasses was made by someone just like you — and it's easy to discover how. To get started building objects in Second Life, head to Chapter 13.

REMEMBER

Don't feel like you have to read this book in order from cover to cover. We organize this info to be used in chunks. For example, if you already know how to chat, jump to another chapter and see how to deck out your avatar. Keep the book handy as you explore Second Life and even after you become a pro. We'll be here to give you tips all along the way.

Figure 1-2: With or without wings, you can fly in Second Life.

Figure 1-3: Two newbie avatars' hands make typing motions as they chat on Welfare Island.

Figure 1-4: Malls in Second Life look much like the mall down the street.

Second Life: It's Not a Game

Want to make a bunch of Second Life users mad really quick? Call Second Life a *game.* Although it looks like a video game similar to *World of Warcraft* or *The*

Sims, Second Life isn't a game. In SL, you don't level-up, complete missions, or earn new armor. So exactly what do you do in Second Life? Well, you live a *second* life. Anything you can do in real life (from washing dishes and buying a house to getting a job and getting married), you can do in SL.

Because SL isn't a game, the folks who use it don't refer to themselves as *players.* Instead, the people who inhabit the SL world are *residents.*

There are games *in* SL, though. You can play poker, golf, baseball, pool, or any other real-life game you can imagine. There are also games unique to SL, such as *Slingo* (as shown in Figure 1-5), which is a bingo-like game first created by a SL resident and now available on many other platforms. You can also participate in role playing games as a vampire, werewolf, postapocalyptic scavenger, or whatever else your role-playing heart desires.

Figure 1-5: Folks waiting for a game of Slingo to begin on Dutchusa Island.

> **TIP**
>
> You can make your own games in SL by discovering how to program objects in Chapter 14.

Most people with an Internet connection have at least heard of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. These Web sites let you connect with people with whom you have something in common and might enjoy talking to, and Second Life isn't much different. You'll be able to join groups centered around hobbies, affiliations, nationalities, and other interests. You'll also be able to make friends with people who are interested in similar things, thus building your own social circle in Second Life, which means you'll always have someone to hang out with.

A Bit of History

Linden Lab, creator of Second Life, created a virtual monster that now has a life of its own — only a few thousand users has grown to a few million in less than a year. From October, 2006 to September, 2007, the population of the SL environment increased 900 percent from 1 million accounts to 9 million accounts.

TIP

To read more about Second Life's history, check out the SL History Wiki (`www.slhistory.org`) and the official blog of Linden Lab (`http://blog. secondlife.com`).

Second Life is loosely based on a virtual reality featured in *Snow Crash,* a 1992 novel by Neal Stephenson. In the book, the main character "jacks" into a digital place called *the Metaverse* where people travel, socialize, and do business virtually. In the book, as in SL, the world is created by the people who populate it. Ten years later, Philip Rosedale and his company men created Linden World, which then became SL. The rest, as they say, is history.

In honor of SL's roots, we still refer to the environment as *the Metaverse.* Other SL lingo gets inspiration from other classic sci-fi sources. For example, when objects are created or taken out of your inventory, they're *rezzed,* which is a term that comes from the 1982 film *Tron* in which unstable digital objects that disappeared were said to "de-rez." But even though SL has roots in the geekiest of sci-fi, what it has become is far from, "Beam me up, Scotty."

TIP

To read up about some of the crazy firsts in Second Life history, visit the SL History Firsts page at `www.slhistory.org/index.php/Firsts`.

Who's in Second Life?

You've probably heard the news reports about companies like IBM and Dell claiming their territory in Second Life (as shown in Figure 1-6), but they wouldn't be there if tons of activity didn't already exist in the space. Big Business isn't alone in Second Life, so who else is in there with them?

Second Life residents are certainly early adopters. On the whole, they're the kind of people who feel the need to poke and prod at every new techy gizmo that comes along. Second Life statistics show that the average user is American and about 28 years of age. The population is split almost half between men and women.

Most people who use Second Life are interested in having fun. They use SL to connect with people who have common interests and generally hang out much as most of us do in real life. In addition, those of us who hang out in SL do a lot of shopping to deck out our avatars and our virtual homes so we can look good as we socialize and have a cool place to do it.

There are, of course, the residents of Second Life who create what the rest of us enjoy buying. SL is full of virtual store fronts selling everything from clothing and jewelry to homes, cars, and gadgets, as shown in Figure 1-7. With the building tools in SL and other software, such as Adobe Photoshop and Poser from e frontier, these creative people market and sell products so the rest of us can better enjoy SL. For more information about beginning your own business in Second Life, read Chapter 17.
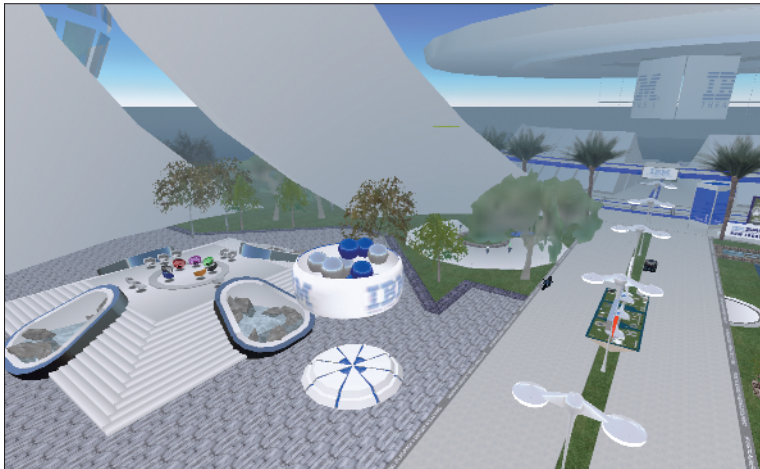

Figure 1-6: IBM Island's business center has many meeting spots as well as product information.

Figure 1-7: The Muse jewelry shop has a beautiful display window to make you want to come inside.

Second Life is Web 2.0 in 3-D

A couple of years ago, Tim O'Reilly (www.oreilleynet.com) coined the term *Web 2.0* to describe the new boom of Web sites that invited users to interact in new ways. O'Reilly described the sites as

- ✔ A way to transform a Web site into a platform (Google documents, for example)
- ✔ A way of harnessing the powers of collective intelligence (such as Wikipedia)
- ✔ Allowing access to large specialized databases (such as Google maps)
- ✔ Providing services instead of products

In the past few years, we've become accustomed to Web 2.0 sites. Second Life might represent the next big thing in these kinds of Web services for the following reasons:

- ✔ **More than software:** The software that you download to access SL isn't SL itself: It's a way to connect to the servers that host the world. The software is just a viewer. The real value of SL is in the *grid* (the collection of islands that create the Second Life world) itself.
- ✔ **A collective effort:** The true beauty of SL is that all its wonders are created not by the company that made it (Linden Lab) but by the folks who use it.
- ✔ **A source of collaboration:** After you start exploring SL, you'll realize that the most powerful element of the environment is the people in it. They collaborate, cooperate, and create a fantastic experience for themselves and others. Sure, there are jerks, but jerks are everywhere. Overall, the population of SL is an amazing resource for all who choose to become part of it.
- ✔ **A service, not a product:** Linden Lab provides a service: access to the grid. The products that are sold in SL are sold by the residents. It's the people who live in SL who make money from their work, not Linden Lab.

The one and only way to get into Second Life is to create an account and log in. In the next few chapters, we walk you through the steps you need to get in there and start having fun — and a Second Life.