

Second life

by Richard Bray

Simulating reality gives players, including government, a test run



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WITH ALMOST 9 MILLION residents, it ranks in the world's top 100 countries. With more than US\$1 million a day in transactions, it has a viable economy. With investments and real estate purchases by dozens of international corporations, agencies and universities, and its own Reuters news agency, it has a certain status in the world. But it isn't real.

Linden Lab's "Second Life" only exists on the desktops of computer users around the world. More complex than any game, the Second Life experience is rapidly becoming a parallel universe of virtual reality. Members or citizens or inhabitants, whatever they choose to call themselves, can select outlandish names, costumes and lifestyles and purchase virtual lots or islands to construct archi-



tectural fantasies that are literally out of this world.

Corporations like Telus, IBM and Coca-Cola have built storefronts and campuses inside Second Life, to conduct both virtual and 'real world' business. Schools and universities around the world have started conducting classes inside Second Life, and many organizations are experimenting seriously with holding conferences, meetings and seminars inside their virtual spaces.

Governments are becoming involved. The United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has constructed a virtual island where visitors can "... soar through a hurricane on the wing of a research aircraft, rise gently through the atmosphere atop a weather balloon, or search for a hidden underwater cave on a side trip from a NOAA submarine."

NASA and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention have joined NOAA inside Second Life, and other US government agencies have representatives who meet regularly 'inside' to learn how best to exploit its otherworldly attributes.

Second Life has its own economy, in which members sell clothing, furniture and

vehicles inside the game, and real objects outside it, generating Linden 'currency' that can be converted into US currency by real banks that have virtual branches inside Second Life. That immediately raises issues of taxation. In the meantime, people are puzzling over what to do about an actual theft of Linden currency worth about US\$40 inside the environment – even if the criminal could be apprehended, where did the crime actually happen? Where are the witnesses? One question, where are the police, is easier to answer. This year, the Vancouver Police Department ran a recruiting station inside Second Life, on the quite realistic assumption that it would be an excellent place to find candidates for its high-tech crimes unit.

Second Life may even be on its way to a kind of national sovereignty. A branch of Sweden's foreign ministry, the Swedish Institute, has opened a virtual embassy inside the environment, as the line between Second Life and real life begins to fade away. *MM*

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