

Second Life Is Dead, Long Live Second Life?

Whether or not you have explored it, and whether or not you enjoyed what you found if so, you're almost certainly aware of Second Life. Perhaps we even met there. So just in case, let me reintroduce myself: I'm Buddy Sprocket.

If by some chance you have not heard of Second Life, it is a 3D virtual world composed largely of user-generated content, a world that has been variously ridiculed for its users' virtual sex lives, praised for its ability to bring online learning to life, and distrusted because of the virtual bullying and the bad behavior of its "griefers." In short, Second Life has been hyped as the next big thing in . . . well, everything.

Seeing the future of Second Life as much more than just a social platform, Linden Lab, the company behind Second Life, even launched Second Life Enterprise—a version of the virtual world platform that companies and organizations could run inside their firewalls, avoiding all the problems of having to share a virtual world with the general public.¹

But the Second Life hype is long gone, replaced initially with anti-hype, as reporters logged back in after a gap of some years to report that it wasn't what it once was and that it seemed empty and dead.² Today, even the anti-hype appears to have disappeared.

Linden Lab has been through some tough times of late, losing almost all of the senior management team over the past eighteen months amid ongoing restructuring. Initiatives such as Second Life Enterprise were cancelled. For anyone who took a dislike to Second Life, this appears to be vindication. But Second Life may not be dead quite yet. Through successive waves of hype and anti-hype, the educational use of Second Life has quietly, slowly, and gradually developed and grown—seemingly impervious to the media din. In the United Kingdom, *Virtual World Watch* continued to record steady growth in the use of Second Life in higher education in 2009 and 2010 even as journalists were declaring the platform dead.³

Still, there are various threats to the educational use of Second Life, and the biggest of these appears to come from unlikely quarters—Linden Lab itself. To see why, we need to look at the wider background and to focus on recent events at the lab.

Second Life was not the first virtual world to be used for educational purposes; others had existed for several decades.⁴

It was not even the first 3D virtual world to allow users to generate their own content. But it was the first to combine easy 3D content creation, (relatively) easy scripting for interactive content, and an effective system to allow or restrict the sharing of user-generated content. And with a stroke of luck, Second Life happened to time its release, in 2003, just as high-speed Internet connections and 3D graphics cards were becoming ubiquitous.

After a few years of slow growth, as the Second Life hype-cycle was beginning to take hold, community manager John Lester—known as Pathfinder in Second Life—cultivated links with the first educational users. He promoted online discussions and supported the emerging educational community as it grew and developed, with its numbers swelling from dozens to thousands.

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Meanwhile, Second Life also attracted many programmers and hacktivists. These were actively courted when Linden Lab released the source code for the Second Life client, the software that end users install on their PCs to communicate with the Linden Lab servers. But for many of these programmers, improving the client software was of less interest than creating their own version of the platform itself—an open-source version of the server software that would enable everyone to create their own virtual world, running on their own computers. Thus was born, in January 2007, OpenSimulator (OpenSim)—a largely compatible, Second Life

lookalike, virtual world platform.

An open-source alternative to Second Life would appear to be an obvious threat, but for a while this was part of the Second Life vision: a virtual world bigger than the web, an "open, highly decentralized platform."⁵ And this makes some sense. Previous attempts by CompuServe and AOL to build private, gated, online communities had failed in face of competition from the open web. To show the way, Linden Lab cooperated with IBM in 2008 to pioneer an open virtual world grid, where users' avatars would be able to travel freely between Second Life and OpenSim virtual worlds.

But Linden Lab's efforts to develop an open grid stalled and eventually, quietly, stopped. So OpenSim developers and the growing number of commercial and nonprofit OpenSim service providers proceeded without them. Today a hypergrid protocol allows users from a range of different virtual worlds to



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keep their avatars as they move between worlds—from personal or institutional worlds with limited and controlled access to public and shared worlds.

OpenSim offers institutions greater control over their virtual worlds and greater ability to make backups of and share their virtual assets using XML-based archive formats. Institutions can mix private areas for teaching and research and open areas for public engagement and can use hypergrid to exploit rich possibilities for cooperation and collaboration across institutional boundaries. But moving from a known and widely used platform, even if there are a few problems, to self-hosting or to a smaller virtual world provider is not without risk. With its large user-base, reasonable cost of entry, and status as the founding platform, Second Life was the natural hub for this open virtual world grid—yet Linden Lab closed itself off. And then, in late 2010, it announced that it would end educational discounts for Second Life, resulting in a near-immediate doubling in server costs for nonprofit users. The trickle of interest in OpenSim, as recorded in *Virtual World Watch* reports and elsewhere, was given an instant boost. Costs, already weighted in favor of OpenSim, shifted dramatically.

As corporations and educational institutions begin to explore alternatives, some familiar friends are ready to welcome them to these new, yet familiar, worlds—people like Chris

Collins, the CEO of Tipodean Technologies and a former member of the Enterprise team at Linden Lab, or John Lester, now a community manager for ReactionGrid, doing much of the same work there that he used to do for Linden Lab before losing his job in internal restructuring. As well as holding regular office hours on ReactionGrid, he coordinates the “Hypergrid Adventurers Club,” which visits different hypergrid-linked virtual worlds every week.⁶

One such world is jokaydiaGrid, run by the educator Jo Kay. Kay used to maintain the Second Life Education Wiki until Linden Lab’s lawyers contacted her about the use of the Second Life name, which prompted her to rename her wiki the jokaydia Virtual Worlds Wiki and encouraged her to pursue OpenSim alternatives. AJ Kelton, leader of the EDUCAUSE Virtual Worlds Constituent Group, had a similar legal exchange over the in-world discussion group he founded, the Second Life Education Roundtable. Now the Virtual Worlds Education Roundtable (VWER), this group is likewise no longer limited to the Second Life platform.

A pattern is discernable here. The VWER 2011 New Year panel discussed Linden Lab’s ability to shoot itself in both feet.⁷ While virtual worlds are still consolidating their place in the educators’ toolbox, Linden Lab, more than any other company, has helped to establish 3D virtual worlds as viable and useful educational platforms. And Linden Lab, more than any other company, appears to be encouraging educators to adopt the open hypergrid as the platform of choice. ■

Notes

1. Mitch Wagner, “Second Life Steps into the Enterprise,” November 4, 2009, <http://www.informationweek.com/news/software/productivity_apps/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=221600198>.
2. Lauren Hansen, “What Happened to Second Life?,” *BBC News Magazine*, November 20, 2009, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8367957.stm>>; Paul Carr, “Why’s It Called Second Life When There’s Nothing Alive There?,” *guardian.co.uk*, November 26, 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/nov/26/paul-carr-second-life>>.
3. The Winter (December) 2009 *Virtual World Watch* report noted that “an academic development community continues to grow, though steadily rather than quickly,” a pattern continued in subsequent reports, <<http://virtualworldwatch.net/snapshots/>>.
4. Cynthia Haynes and Jan Rune Holmevik, *High Wired: On the Design, Use, and Theory of Educational MOOs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).
5. This vision was articulated by Philip Rosedale, the founder of Linden Lab, in 2007. Quoted in Dylan Tweney, “Stanford Summit: The Killer App for Virtual Reality Is Civility,” Epicenter blog, *Wired*, August 1, 2007, <<http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2007/08/stanford-summ-2/>>.
6. The homepage for the Hypergrid Adventurers Club is on John Lester’s personal blog: *Be Cunning and Full of Tricks*, <<http://becunningandfulloftricks.com/hypergrid-adventurers-club/>>.
7. For a transcript of the typed chat from the panel discussion, see “Possible, Probable, and Preferable Future of Education in Virtual Worlds,” *Virtual Worlds Education Roundtable*, January 6, 2011, <<http://www.vwer.org/?p=935>>.

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