



Get a (first!) life: questioning the sobriety of the Second Life phenomenon

I confess: my name is Amoz Wunderlich and I am living a digital double-life in a virtual reality. During the last few weeks I have been visiting this fictitious world filled with bars, nightclubs, universities, political rallies and marketing opportunities. This fictitious world is known among its three million global inhabitants as Second Life (SL).

In this parallel universe avatars socialise, make love, communicate, consume and go to jail. SL is one of several massive multiplayer on-line role playing games on the internet and has reached a tipping point in its global popularity in the last few months. Launched in June 2003, its membership grew to 1 million users by 18 October 2006. Since then it has exploded to 3 million in January 2007. Aside from the marketing and educational potential of this virtual reality, which has brought market leaders such as IBM, Adidas, Telstra and several cutting-edge universities into its virtual fore, my experience as Amoz Wunderlich leads me to question the sobriety of the SL phenomenon.

In this parallel universe, turning over around a billion dollar annually and facilitating the rise of new 'in world' millionaires, such as fictitious property magnate Anshe Chung, users spend Linden Dollars on consumer goods, education, concerts, personal development, sex and other goods and services that we commonly consume in our real lives. These Linden Dollars can even be exchanged for real, US dollars.

The consuming avatars become a vicarious life force, doing and saying what we may not allow ourselves to do or say in real life. This is where it gets tricky.

While Amoz Wunderlich has had a great time teleporting himself around SL on a research mission and checking out the educational potential of this other world, the person behind this avatar has a first life filled with the richness, fluidity, challenges and sensory experiences.

My concern with SL is that it develops into an escapist arena, devoid of real human interaction, connection and fulfillment. While I applaud the founders and developers of SL in their ambitious quest to provide a space for people to communicate and realise some of their first life ambitions, I doubt whether a successful, enriching and 'cool' life in a second reality really translates into first life happiness and fulfillment. In fact, the odds are that the effect is precisely the opposite. Being able to act out ones fantasies, without any repercussions beyond being banned from an internet site, could become addictive and cause people to favour their second life over their first life.



On the other hand, does the provision and facilitation of this arena for avatar-actualisation, as opposed to the idea of self-actualisation, blur our distinction between the Western logical/linear perception of reality and dreams? Can we in fact be inspired and translate avatar-actualisation, into first life self-actualisation?

While it is possible, I wonder whether this arena is not geared more toward facilitating a sense of self-worth for individuals starved of real world meaning and esteem, rather than inspiring individuals to leave their avatars behind and get a first life.

This isn't, of course, the first time we've seen this phenomenon. Previously it has been solely the domain of 'geeks' – Dungeons and Dragons, Warhammer, CyberPunk – role playing games that consume the players. Where the Second Life phenomenon becomes truly interesting, is in the fact that it is so wide spread – among people of all different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and social status.

The commercial viability of the SL concept is fictitious personal development, connection and communication, so why would there be any encouragement for its members to go out and pursue their passions, dreams and purpose in real life?

Frankly, there is none. Money can be made though, which illustrates the notion that the green stuff is not real stuff, but merely an idea. How could ABN Amro otherwise provide financial advice in SL, LindeX ensure a locked-in exchange rate, and inflation be a problem as the Linden Dollar devalues in accordance with the increasing amount of fictitious dollars floating around?

Similarly, while I commend the communication channel that SL has created which has served to connect geographically disparate people, I wonder whether at this stage the concept does not also devalue the human experience in real life.

In the end, if there was one thing that Amoz Wunderlich learned from this experience it was simply that while his 'second life' was fun, Anders Sorman-Nilsson's human experience of real life is equally filled with mystery, challenge, spice, development and evolution and lacks neither opportunity nor space for self-actualisation.

It is also free to join, doesn't require large downloads and is impervious to hackers.

Most importantly – it is real. And for all of its cool graphics and highly developed 'in world' social system and economy Second Life is not. It is merely a computer game. Fun, but no more than an escapist distraction.