

Journal of • Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

Vol. 1. No. 2

ISSN: 1941-8477

“Virtual Worlds Research: Consumer Behavior in Virtual Worlds”
November 2008

Having But Not Holding:
Consumerism & Commodification in Second Life
By Lori Landay, Berklee College of Music

This is a brief essay, we call "think pieces," designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"Consumer behavior in virtual worlds: is it really any different to the real world, or is it simply a case of 'old wine in a new bottle'?"

Keywords: commodification; avatar; consumerism.

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*Consumerism & Commodification in Second Life***
By Lori Landay, Berklee College of Music

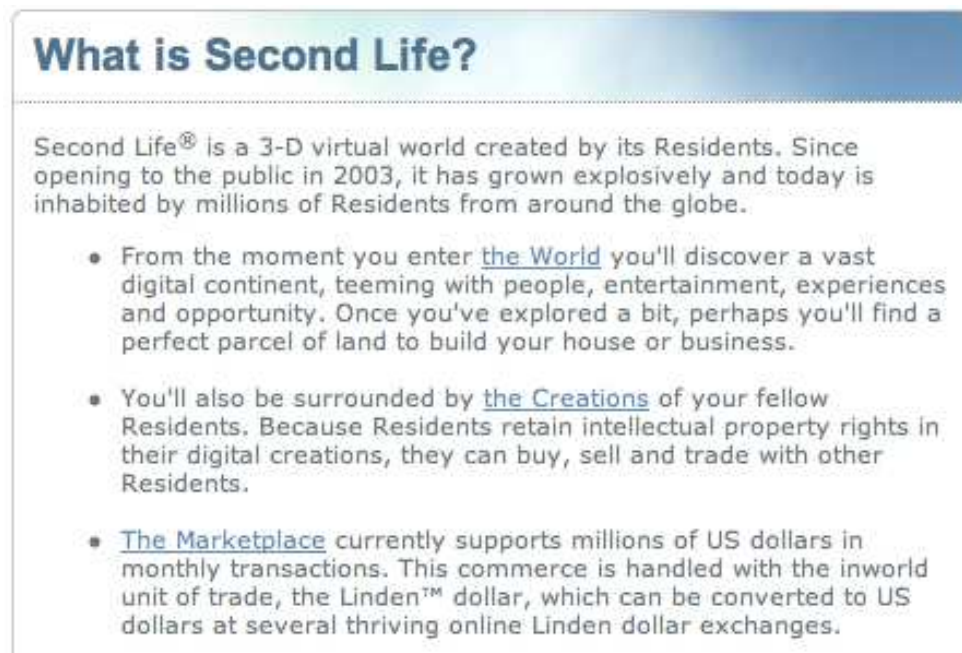


What does it mean to own or to consume in a virtual world? Who does the owning - the avatar or the person? Are real needs and wants satisfied? How can we tell? These are some of the broader questions that come to mind when pondering if consumerism in Second Life (SL) is really ‘old wine in new bottles.’ An interesting metaphor that calls attention to one of the issues at the very heart of a consideration of consumerism and commodification in virtual worlds. The saying ‘old wine in new bottles’ suggests that the product is the same as before, but the container or label has changed. In a virtual world, there is neither the original product nor a new container, only what science fiction author William Gibson called a “consensual hallucination” (Gibson, 1984) which gives virtual world “objects” meaning, any value beyond dreams or fantasy, ascribes meta-material value to what is actually only code, digital information. How can we think about consumerism when there are no real consumer goods, only virtual ones? Are the needs and wants virtual, as well, or are those real? What does it mean to own something in Second Life? Is it like having something without being able to hold it?

Most people who spend time in a virtual world—myself included—will tell you that, yes, it is satisfying to own in SL. For example, I like some of the things I have built, and that I have bought land. It does not matter that there is no spoon, as Neo repeats to himself in the film *The Matrix*, or wine; in a world of illusion, what difference do the bottles make if I can pretend the wine is anything I like? One also could pose it the other, more cynical, way, too: who cares what the wine is, if I can change the bottle at will? To continue *The Matrix* allusion, that is how the traitor Cypher sees it. Of course, in asking the question about old wine and new bottles, the emphasis is on consumer behavior, not on the product—is it the same old consumerism that we

have in real life? At first sight, it may seem that the answer is yes: even a quick look around Second Life reveals that the acquisitive desires so evident in American and global cultures are predominant in SL too. It is as if no one questions why avatars need all the stuff that fill their houses, but that residents put up houses and started filling them with all the things that real life houses have. Avatars do not need to eat, so why do they need kitchens? (Nice kitchens. Kitchens that make my real kitchen look pretty shabby, in fact.)

From the beginning of SL, real world metaphors predominated, and it follows that real world activities would as well. Early on, Linden Labs founder Philip Rosedale stated “I’m not building a game . . . I’m building a new country” (Terdiman, 2004). Although it is not a game, one might easily think that the official play is around consumerism and acquisition, as “What is Second Life?” (2008) highlights.



What is Second Life?

Second Life® is a 3-D virtual world created by its Residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by millions of Residents from around the globe.

- From the moment you enter [the World](#) you'll discover a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity. Once you've explored a bit, perhaps you'll find a perfect parcel of land to build your house or business.
- You'll also be surrounded by [the Creations](#) of your fellow Residents. Because Residents retain intellectual property rights in their digital creations, they can buy, sell and trade with other Residents.
- [The Marketplace](#) currently supports millions of US dollars in monthly transactions. This commerce is handled with the inworld unit of trade, the Linden™ dollar, which can be converted to US dollars at several thriving online Linden dollar exchanges.

Fig. 1 – What is Second Life (<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>)

Our imaginations are limited by the metaphors we can envision—and rez (short for "resolve," the term for how images become fully visible inworld). In Second Life, the majority of residents' activities are understandably shaped by the parameters of their real or first life. Because virtual worlds are based on the metaphors of real life, seeking to be simulations if not simulacra, users are going to use their real world activities, interests, and values as models for their virtual ones. In the subjunctive, playful realm of possibility that Second Life is, what else might people do? There are a lot of answers in Second Life already: art, education, games, politics, meditation, spirituality, music, and many kinds of imaginative things. One of the most interesting groups working in SL is “Not Possible in Real Life” (<http://npirl.blogspot.com/>), or the very interesting SL installation that incorporates sound, movement, and image by DynaFleur inworld <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Princeton%20South/81/87/41>.

Other examples of going beyond the models presented by our material world abound inworld, but nevertheless new residents are quickly encouraged to participate in the SL economy,

and the ways of doing that are primarily based on consumer behaviors that exist in the real world. Still, within the buying and selling system, there might be something else going on in virtual worlds that means there is some new wine, Red Bull, or maybe some other kind of bull available. Maybe we can shed some light on some of the social and cultural issues around consumer behavior in virtual worlds by shifting to a consideration of virtual commodification, which is like real world commodification, but liberated from ‘pesky’ materiality. Here is my definition: Like its analog model, virtual commodification is a process of transforming experience, ideas, and ideas about the self into the quantifiable products of inworld consumer culture, and placing those products in a social context in which people define things in terms of themselves, and themselves in terms of things, i.e., that “self” is created and understood through the goods and appearance of the goods people consume. Cultural representations and social practices reinforce the idea that the commodities an avatar consumes and displays not only express but are also the source of identity and worth, not anything intrinsic or internal.

In Second Life, there is *nothing* other than the goods and appearances of the goods that the avatars own. In Second Life, there are only clothes, ‘prim hair’, skins, cool cars, wings, and tails to indicate the inner qualities that I fervently hope and believe are experienced and communicated, and they are more important than appearances in real life. What are the implications for gender, age, physical ability, race, sexuality, class, and ethnicity in a world in which all of these aspects of identity are telegraphed visually, treated as commodities, and easily changed at will? Moreover, in SL, people’s physical spaces are malleable in the same way that one’s physical appearance is, and what you/your avatar puts on your land (if you have it) is a further reflection of you. It is a consumerist and commodified fantasy that a person’s appearance is the measure of their value, and can be made to reflect (or cover up) their true nature; it is the very creed of the “shelter magazines” and home improvement and design industries (so recently booming, now of course bust) that your home should reflect and create your ideal self and environment. In a virtual world without limitations of physical resources, genetics, or physics, what limitations are left?

As someone who in SL accidentally unlinked all the parts of her house and did something jarring to them, I can tell you that there are limitations of skill, time, and aesthetics. But really, I blame it on my avatar, L1Aura, and you can see and hear her side of it by following the links: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpZa0Kt3kxo>, or <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Boga/186/137/26>. Which brings us to the final topic here in this consideration of commodification and virtual worlds: what is the relationship between the person and the avatar? Are avatars commodities? Are they characters we create? Simulations? Simulacra? Are they aspects of us? Are our avatars like the Perky Pat dolls in the Philip K. Dick novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), and we are living through them? More to the point for this discussion, if I want something and L1 gets a virtual version of it, am I happier? Why? How?

Ultimately, the most interesting questions arise when we consider what effect experiences in virtual worlds have on our lives in the real, material world. The Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford University (<http://vhil.stanford.edu/>) is engaged in several fascinating projects that explore these connections, including research into how the appearance of the avatar can shape the person’s social behavior in the virtual world, what Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson term the “Proteus effect” (2007), and perhaps in the real world as well. One study found that when people used an avatar based on an aged version of themselves, they allocated more

resources for retirement (Ersner-Hershfield, Bailenson, & Carstensen, 2008). To be sure, there are implications for how the marketing and public relations fields might try to harness the potential influence of virtual experiences on real world activity that are sobering to consider. There are also reasons to be hopeful: research suggests that virtual experiences and identity can have a positive effect on real life, and my own participation in a Massachusetts General Hospital/Benson Henry Institute for Mind-Body Medicine study of teaching people the Relaxation Response in Second Life reinforces this.

Perhaps the easy owning of SL can satisfy real life desires for consumption? After spending some time shopping around for houses before deciding that a free one would suit me just as well, I've found myself looking at different styles of actual houses and thinking: "I could own that if I wanted to" (in SL, of course). Perhaps this is akin to the perspective of the miniaturist who starts to see the world around him or her foremost as a model for the dollhouse world that can be manipulated, collected, and controlled. Can I install a nice kitchen in my empty SL house and will that make me feel better about my real kitchen (which is really fine)? Can people channel and divert the barrage of consumerist messages that bombard them from every possible medium and direction into virtual activity? In this economy, maybe we had better hope so! Perhaps there is a way to separate the psychological, creative, spiritual, political, sexual, and emotional desires that feed consumerism (manipulated by advertising and mass consumer culture in general) from actual material needs, and seek out ways of satisfying desires that do not have detrimental implications for a real world of limited resources, and have a chance of actually making people happy.

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