Leading a double life

In a user-created universe, alter egos bridge the gap between fantasy and reality

By Irene Sege, Globe Staff  |  October 25, 2006

In real life, Jeff Lipsky is an ordinary-looking white guy -- 35 years old, 5 feet 8 inches tall, thinning hair, T-shirt and jeans -- who creates abstract drawings in his Tyngsborough townhouse. Online, in the lush, three-dimensional, user-created universe called Second Life, he's the cartoon character Filthy Fluno, a bearded, wide-bodied, wild-tressed, fang-toothed, black gallery owner who sells virtual versions of his drawings to other denizens of this virtual world.

In real life, Rebecca Nesson -- slight, 30, short hair -- is a lawyer working on a doctorate in computer science who teaches at Harvard Extension School. Her Second Life avatar, or cartoon self, is Rebecca Berkman, who looks like Nesson and who, standing in a virtual amphitheater, leads avatars from as far away as Korea and Houston in a discussion section of the Extension School course CyberOne.

Such is the range of Second Life, a simulated world populated by avatars and built by their human alter egos. Last week the number of registered users crossed the 1 million mark, up from 100,000 in early 2006, leaving Second Life poised to become the next big cyber phenomenon.

Launched in 2003 by California-based Linden Lab, Second Life is a website where users create animated cartoon avatars to represent themselves -- usually as humans (often buff, busty, beautiful humans), and sometimes as fanciful or furry creatures. Linden sells land in this virtual frontier, and users (a.k.a. "residents") design and make everything from virtual stores for the land to virtual sweaters for the avatars. They buy things and sell things that exist only "in world" -- so many that last month $6.6 million in user-user transactions changed hands. They role-play, gamble, teach classes, make music, open restaurants, push politics -- all as they guide their avatars through the elaborate virtual landscapes and cityscapes that give Second Life its stepping-into-Wonderland quality.

"Second Life is no more a game than the Web is a game. It's a platform," says John Lester, 39, of Somerville, Linden's community
and education manager. "This feels exactly like it felt when the Web was first coming out. I remember feeling the hair on the back of my neck standing up."

Unlike such sites as Sims Online, Second Life's content is created almost entirely by users. The result is a varied, free wheeling world, a virtual society more spontaneous than the similar There.com, a PG-13, 3-D social network with 500,000 users that, unlike Second Life, approves items that users create before introducing them.

Second Life has shopping centers and support centers for stroke survivors and corporate centers for companies that view hanging a shingle in-world as the cutting edge move that launching a website once was. It has replicas of the Flintstones' town of Bedrock and a Darfur refugee camp. An American Cancer Society relay in-world raised $40,000, and an avatar of former Virginia governor Mark Warner was interviewed in Second Life. Reuters just opened a virtual news bureau.

The avatars lend what Lester calls an "emotional bandwidth" to every encounter. Avatars "talk" via text message and appear to be typing whenever they talk. Many products that enterprising users create -- and, if they wish, sell -- are designed to individualize avatars' experience, whether it's coiffures and cars or animations that mimic kissing or skydiving or dancing.

Joining Second Life is free, but buying or selling goods and services and land requires an account. Business is conducted in Lindens, convertible at roughly 275 per dollar.

Virtual intimacy
The avatar Tuna Oddfellow, dashing in silver mohawk and windswept cape, has a virtual Gothic mansion, "Collinwood," that a fellow Second Lifer and aficionado of the old "Dark Shadows" television show built for him gratis. Oddfellow -- in real life Matthew Fishman, 38-year-old magician and fund-raiser from Watertown -- also runs a virtual wedding business, complete with invitations, catered food, disc jockey, and premarital counseling, for avatars he's convinced are committed to each other.

"I can't marry you in Second Life," Fishman says in an interview, "unless you realize you have First Life emotions."

In Second Life, Fishman has experienced both heartbreak and friendship. Last October the woman behind an avatar whom Oddfellow was dating died. They'd never met in real life, but, as avatar Oddfellow, he typed words of comfort to her son's avatar and was comforted himself by avatar friends. He conducted her virtual funeral.

"Second Life," Fishman says, "has taught me that we're not really limited to deep friendships you can reach out and touch."

Just as there's sex on the Internet, so, too, in Second Life. Linden permits sex, nudity, and profanity on private land in "mature" areas open to adults only. Linden investigates reports of abuse of this policy, as well as its rules against harassment, vandalism, and other antisocial behavior, and metes out warnings, suspensions, or expulsions.

Second Life has its share of cybersex-for-hire and deviant sexual activity, but for Fishman simulated intimacy revolves around romance.

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"There's a wining and a dining," he says. "I'm not the kind of person who in Second Life or First Life will fall into bed with somebody without developing a relationship."

Fishman will soon perform his seventh virtual wedding. "If they're doing this correctly," he says, "it should be the biggest day of their Second Life."

Companies join in
Rodica Buzescu of Somerville, who graduated from Harvard in June, is a project manager for Millions of Us, a California-based start-up that helps companies establish a presence in Second Life.

Millions of Us joins a coterie of companies and individuals making a living developing objects and experiences in Second Life. It's created virtual Toyotas and built the virtual loft where Warner Bros. invited avatars to preview Regina Spektor's latest album a month before its release.

Linden, which is almost profitable, makes money on virtual land sales and the fee it charges to exchange currency. Otherwise, Second Life entrepreneurs pocket whatever they earn.

With Second Life trailing the 6 million users of World of Warcraft and 114 million members of MySpace, firms like Millions bank on the potential of new cyber worlds, not only as marketplaces but also as buzz generators and virtual meeting grounds.

When American Apparel opened a replica retail store in-world, it was less interested in selling virtual T-shirts than in what Web director Raz Schionning calls a "boundary-pushing experiment" in reaching a young, tech-savvy audience. "When we think about Web marketing, it makes sense," he says, "to not just put your money in banner panels."

Second Life's big industry is fashion, be it clothes or hair or accessories. A virtual gown by Second Life designer Dazzle, for instance, runs 350 Linden.

Top Second Life fashionistas earn $50,000 to $75,000 a year, says Wagner James Au, whose New World Notes blog chronicles Second Life. Competition can be intense. A recent dispute about the legitimacy of modifying virtual "skins" -- full-body coverings -- for an avatar's personal use became so nasty that designer Torrid Midnight left Second Life.

Meanwhile, Buzescu, 24, an aspiring lawyer, envisions future legal needs. "The issues coming up," she says, "will be with companies with real-life interests coming into environments like this."

Academic avatars
Rebecca Nesson has never taught a class like "CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion," a joint enterprise with Harvard Law School sponsored by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society.

Here she is as avatar Rebecca Berkman, standing outside a virtual replica of Harvard's Austin Hall before 30 avatars of Extension School students. A wolf sits in front, teaching fellow Buzescu is an android, and everyone can fly, all of which adds a touch of whimsy to even the most serious Second Life endeavors, in this case giving far-flung students a virtual place to meet and work on class projects. Gone is
off-site education as simply posting videos of lectures online and communicating with students via e-mail.

"It's better than anything I've seen in distance learning," Nesson says.

Harvard is among some 80 academic institutions exploring Second Life. Similar experiments occur on There.com. Others see different potential in Second Life. In a previous job, Lester used Second Life to help people with mild autism practice socializing. Some predict Second Life will engage people around the world in political discourse, but Berkman research fellow Ethan Zuckerman contends it's too technically sophisticated for developing nations with outdated equipment.

"The idea," he says, "that it's going to be a utopia where we have people from very different cultures interacting seems overly optimistic."

**Fantasy and reality**

Jeff Lipsky, meanwhile, is finding the balance between fantasy and reality. When he noticed few African-Americans in-world, he gave his avatar, Filthy Fluno, dark skin. His dog's crooked tooth inspired Fluno's fangs.

"When I first started playing I felt like I was one of those white rappers who pretend they're black. I wasn't having that much fun. Now it's more my personality," Lipsky says. "I might do some extra swearing."

One night, while Lipsky, who runs a nonprofit arts group, watched TV with his wife, an avatar art guide named Nata Clutterbuck sold a drawing he'd imported to Second Life. At a recent event in Filthy's Warehouse, he sold $275 worth of virtual drawings and a real drawing for $325.

"I'm bringing my real art to the virtual space. Now I'm bringing things from the virtual space into real life and bringing it back to the virtual life," Lipsky says. "It's wild."

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