Virtual loses its virtues
By Alana Semuels, Times Staff Writer
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LIKE any pioneer, Marshal Cahill arrived in a new world curious and eager to sample its diversions. Over time, though, he saw an elite few grabbing more than their share.

They bought up all the plum real estate. They awarded building contracts to friends. They stifled free speech.

Cahill saw a bleak future, but he felt powerless to stop them. So he detonated an atomic bomb outside an American Apparel outlet. Then another outside a Reebok store.

As political officer for the Second Life Liberation Army, Cahill is passionately committed to righting what he considers the wrongs of a world that exists only on the computer servers of Linden Lab in San Francisco.

Linden is the company behind Second Life, a virtual world in which Internet users act out parallel fantasy lives. They date. They build houses. They work. Some players support themselves in real life by selling goods or services in the game.

Some see the space as a utopia free of real-world constraints, where they can build their vision of a perfect realm from scratch. It's a place where denizens can reinvent themselves as a supermodel or a rodent, own an island or fly, no plane necessary, to a virtual Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

In the last year, the number of people who had visited Second Life skyrocketed from 100,000 to 2 million. As the population grows, early denizens are learning the truth of Jean-Paul Sartre's observation "Hell is other people."

The website is facing the problem that many would-be utopias faced before it: When building the ideal world, it's impossible to change while remaining perfect in everyone's eyes.

Cahill and his conspirators say they don't necessarily mind the new residents, but they want more influence in deciding the virtual world. Most important, they want Linden Lab to allow voting on issues affecting their in-world experience.

"The population of the world should have a say in the running of the world," Cahill said during an in-world interview. Cahill is this participant's online name, incidentally. He refused to reveal his real-world name for fear of banishment from Second Life.

The army has staged a number of protests in Second Life to publicize its position. Three gun-toting members shot customers outside American Apparel — bullet wounds in Second Life are not fatal but merely disrupt a user's experience — and Reebok stores last year.

Then they stepped up the campaign, exploding nukes, which manifested themselves in swirling fireballs that thrust users at the scene into motionless limbo.

Cahill said the group targeted in-world corporate locations to draw real-world attention to its cause.

LONG-TERM Second Life residents have given Cahill and his conspirators money to buy virtual guns and other weapons. Cahill says he believes that 80% of long-term residents support his cause.
Virtual loses its virtues – Los Angeles Times

Cahill, an entrepreneur who splits his time between London and San Francisco in the real world, compares himself to John Adams, the second U.S. president. Adams would have been considered a terrorist by his foes, Cahill said, because he helped lead the American Revolution. The Second Life Liberation Army, he said, is just trying to make the world a better place.

It's not unusual for original members to feel a loss of control when their community grows, said Michael Macy, a sociology professor at Cornell University who studies online worlds. It's like a poky mining town that suddenly finds itself in the middle of a gold rush.

"If thousands of people show up to pan for gold," he said, "the original members are going to be very upset."

But the malcontents and pranksters — and there are many of them, even outside Cahill's organization — make for a dangerous environment. Land sharks try to drive users off certain properties, and mafias have been known to harass users. Giant male genitals have crashed events, bouncing around and distracting participants. A recent posting in the Second Life Herald called the space "the freaking wild wild west."

For some users, these events illuminate how much Second Life has changed. Some early users in particular point to corporations as the culprits. They began to build their presence in Second Life as the population grew.

Big companies such as Toyota and Adidas have opened stores in the game, where players can buy virtual products for their make-believe characters. Second Life has its own currency, Linden dollars, which can be earned in the game or bought with real money at an exchange rate of 267.3 Lindens to $1.

"The utopian age has passed," said Peter Ludlow, professor of linguistics and philosophy at the University of Michigan and editor of "Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias." Ludlow, whose Second Life persona, or avatar, is named Urizenus Sklar, compares Second Life's current status to the ending of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, in which the Shire, previously untouched by the outside world, is destroyed.

"You're seeing these little indigenous communities and fantastical creatures being forced out by 20th century corporations coming in," he said. For instance, the head of a council of elves — one of the earliest groups present in-world — left the game amid the changes, he said.

Ludlow is the author of a venomous Internet post complaining that companies lack creativity in a world that many participants entered for the sole purpose of living creatively. Chain stores such as American Apparel are being dropped into "this fantasy world with unicorns and flying elephants," he said. "It's an eyesore."

Meanwhile, Linden Lab is caught in a bind. To survive, it needs the revenue that comes with more users and corporations buying "land" on the "grid," as Second Life's online space is called. But it wants the creativity of its original users to flourish.

Linden Lab sees the importance of companies using Second Life to interact with customers, Director of Marketing Catherine Smith said in a statement. "This will require balancing the concerns of early adopters and other niche demographics."

THAT'S not how Manhattanite Catherine Fitzpatrick, a Russian translator, sees it. Fitzpatrick, who in the game is a man named Prokofy Neva, worries that corporations will force small businesses in Second Life to close.

Fitzpatrick, 50, joined Second Life to explore her creative side and meet like-minded people and eventually got involved in selling real estate. She built a nice home for herself with an ocean view, which she said was ruined when someone moved in next door and built a giant refrigerator that blocked her light.

The disruptions avatars are experiencing are like those faced by residents of the Soviet Union as it industrialized quickly, Fitzpatrick said.

"One day, the elves were banging on their drums and making elf tunics," she said. "And the next thing you know, Nissan comes in and starts giving away free cars."

It's not just the corporations that are drawing the ire of original players. Some long-term residents say the functioning of Second Life has been eroded by the increase in users. Those who choose not to pay the $9.95 fee for upgraded membership come in for special criticism, accused of clogging the system without contributing anything.
Residents of all utopian societies want to build an ideal place but often have specific ideas about who fits in, said Ken Roemer, past president of the Society for Utopian Studies.

"Who they don't let in defines the boundary of who they are," he said. "As the place grows, there's this notion of the wrong type of people coming in."

But letting in new users might be key to Second Life's survival. Every GM, American Apparel and IBM that sets up shop in Second Life contributes much-needed real dollars to a company that Chief Financial Officer John Zdanowski said only recently became profitable.

"It's impossible for Second Life to continue to exist without rapidly growing the user base and involving real world companies in their economy," said Sibley Verbeck, chief executive of Washington-based Electric Sheep Co., which helps corporations set up shop in Second Life. Verbeck, whose avatar is named Sibley Hathor, said corporate capital enhanced the user experience by providing Linden Labs with the means to improve the virtual world.

The social networking sites Facebook and MySpace faced similar balancing acts as marketers arrived targeting the throngs who had gathered there, said Charlene Li, an analyst at Forrester Research. The same disdain greeted the early promoters of the World Wide Web itself: Users were aghast that companies could use Web technology for commerce.

To be sure, many Second Life players are happy to adapt to the changes and see where they take the virtual world. Longtime Second Life user Ilya Vedrashko, for instance, is skeptical when he hears friends talk about the good old days. He thinks the changes are just part of a natural progression as Second Life grows out of being a small, close-knit community and into a metropolis.

But it's on to a new utopia for some, said avatar Nimrod Yaffle, who in real life is a 19-year-old student from Columbus, Ohio, named Chris. He said unhappy Second Life users were moving to sites such as Multiverse, which provides technology to create your own virtual world.

Through Multiverse, Second Life detractors can delve into themes such as science fiction or Shakespeare, said co-founder Corey Bridges.

"We get Second Life denizens who say, 'I want to create a virtual space that is much more rich than Second Life,' " he said. "They want to control more of the variables."

That people are moving on is not surprising. Utopias never live up to their aspirations, even in the virtual world, and the more passionate will keep looking. "We all go from anticipation to anticipation," said Paul Saffo, a Silicon Valley futurist.

It's unlikely that those who leave will be able to easily find a virtual space that rivals Second Life, which has $20 million in venture capital invested in it. But for many dreamers, the struggle to keep creating is half the fun. And although Frederick Jackson Turner famously ruminated on the end of the American frontier in 1893, the Internet provides endless territory to build on.

"In cyberspace," Saffo said, "there's always room over the next ridge to build a new perspective of heaven."

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