

Second Life

A Model for applications and integration

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Abstract

Second Life⁽¹⁾, an online 3D virtual community developed by Linden Research, Inc.⁽²⁾, came to international mainstream media attention in 2006. Since then its user base has roughly doubled every six months. With a greater number of users, the number of applications of a community with a varied user base also increases. These applied uses of Second Life can be analyzed and placed in a two dimensional model where the axes correspond to the amount of rules and the measure of entertainment involved in the application. We will find that Second Life is still mostly used for entertainment purposes and less for constructive ends.

Furthermore, the recent distribution of the client software under the GNU GPL⁽³⁾ allows for greater customization of the client, like communication with third party packages. We will explore some of the possibilities of using modified Second Life clients in combination with a separate back-end to facilitate communications not supported by the Second Life servers. The implications of an important future step, open source server software, are also worth looking into.

We will conclude with a brief overview of the future of Second Life. An appendix on developing the open source viewer software is also presented.

Keywords: Second Life, Open Source, Web Services, Model of Second Life Applications, Mashups, developing Second Life software.

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Introduction

Second Life (abbreviated 'SL') is an online 3D virtual world that was launched in 2003 by Linden Research, Inc., also known as "Linden Lab." The program came to international mainstream media attention in mid-2006. This was largely due to the fact that numerous large companies decided to present themselves in this virtual world that seemed to be all the rage in order to gain more attention from their target audiences and to show that their company was a modern one that kept up with the latest social habits of the mainstream^{(4, 'Leading a double life') (5, 'Get a Second Life')}.

Second Life users (residents) can create objects when they are logged on. They retain property rights to their creations and are free to copy them, give them to other residents. Objects that are transferred to other residents can be modified by new owners, but only if the original creator has set the permissions of the object accordingly. They can also sell their creations or allow next-owners to sell them.

Second Life has its own economy based on its own currency, the Linden Dollar (L\$). L\$ that are earned by residents by selling property or exchanging US Dollars for Linden Dollars. The exchange rate is fairly stable around 265 L\$ per US\$1.00^(6, LindeX Market Data). In 2006 the GDP of Second Life was 64 million US\$. Estimates for 2007 are between 500 and 600 million US\$, almost tenfold last year's GDP.

As with the rest of the Internet, Second Life users come from many different stations and belong to a wide range of subcultures, almost all of which are in some way represented in Second Life. Different users have different needs and thus use Second Life each for their own purposes. These user groups and their purposes with Second Life will be described later.

The world of Second Life, also called "the grid," is hosted entirely on servers run by Linden Lab. By default, users only have to download and install client software locally. Since the entire grid (all avatar data, objects, landscapes, textures and texts) is hosted by Linden Lab, this means that the content of Second Life can only be modified through the Second Life client software. The recent move to distribution of the client software under the GNU GPL has made it easier for third parties to develop their own modified versions of the client software and special tools for Second Life. Another big step that goes even further is that in the near future, Linden Lab plans to make the server code open source as well. The implications of such a decision are widespread and will have a profound impact on Second Life as it is currently known. The issues surrounding open source client and server software for Second Life will be discussed.

Creating a model: Categorising the applications of Second Life

Just like the group of Internet-users are a subset of the human population, the group of Second Life users is a subset of the users of the Internet. Users on the Internet are of different stations and belong to one or more subcultures depending on their activities on the Internet. This is also the case with Second Life. Though the amount of uses differ between the Internet and Second Life, they can still be distinguished in each environment.

Most of the Second Life users begin their Second Life experience by just walking around, exploring the world and enjoying the 3D scenery. These are the casual users

who, for now, walk about with no real goal in Second Life other than to enjoy themselves. Users that want to achieve more in Second Life, if only to earn more L\$, start building their own objects and selling them. This can become more than just a hobby if a resident wants to make a considerable amount of money. Statistics show that out of the 8 million residents a number around 40.000 residents and rising has a Positive Monthly Linden Dollar Flow. This profit ranges from 0-50 US\$ for 30.000 residents to more than 2.000 US\$ for a select group of users of around 400^(7, Second Life's first millionaire).

Real-world companies that want to reach their target audiences through Second Life invest in virtual property and, for instance, sell virtual versions of their sports shoes to residents.

Second Life is also a place where scholars of different disciplines come to study. Students that are interested in 3D graphics use the built-in creation tools to create objects. Students of social sciences conduct social or psychological experiments similar to those in the real world. On the same note, economic students study the workings of the Second Life economy and how it applies to the real-world economy. The basis is that Second Life functions as a sandbox for experiments that are not quite managable in the real world.

Second Life is often called a game, and this has been disputed by its residents because there are essentially no rules imposed on the residents except the rules that make the virtual world function. These rules include physics (though a house can be floating in mid-air if its creator so chooses, or can fall and slide down a hill for that matter) or restrictions on areas that are not open to the general public. But some areas of have extra rules that visitors must obey to. These are made by residents who want to use Second Life as a game, a 3D shooter for instance, where statistics like health and ammunition have been scripted and where residents 'die,' only to find that nothing has really happened once they choose to exit the game area. So in essence, if Second Life is not technically a game, these areas are^(8, Second Life Games). These Second life Game engines run a separate backend database and WWW server for character data and statistics^(9, Weapons of Choice).



Figure 1: Lost City of Angels, a Second Life game

Continuing, some areas have rules not centered on the 'physical' interaction of bullets and bodies, but rather on the social interaction of residents. RolePlaying Games (RPG's) exist in many different forms and places, likewise they exist in Second Life^(10, Samarkand RP kicks off). Here residents use their self-created or L\$-bought clothes and indulge in all kinds of roleplay, from medieval fantasy to science fiction to more niche-like fantasy settings, out of which virtual erotica is perhaps not so niche-like, but well, no one wants to admit to having had cyber-sex.

The diversity of the Second Life users gives way to a wide range of applications: the reasons or goals for which Second Life is used. There are casual residents who just hang out and make friends in the virtual world, or meet existing friends in the virtual world, and who maybe build some simple objects for their own uses (because nobody wants to pay for a hat that looks like a box). Then there are students who spend time in Second Life working with the building tools or conducting social or economic experiments. Employees who work on the virtual presentation of their company in Second Life in order to gain the attention of the masses. Gamers who either engage in action-like games with guns that they designed themselves or gamers who act in RPG's. People also use Second Life to act out whatever fantasy they have that cannot easily be acted out in real life.

When looked at, the different activities within Second Life can be categorised in different ways. It depends on the viewpoint. One viewpoint can be obtained by looking at the number of rules that are involved in the activity. Is the resident free to do whatever he wants, or are there restrictions in conduct and/or movement? A casual user can walk go wherever he wants to, talk to whoever he wants, and build whatever he wants. There are no rules whatsoever that restrict him. A resident that participates in an RPG on Second Life is often a member of a group of some kind. He is expected to wear clothes that match the setting of the game and adhere to a certain code of conduct. These restrictions make the RPG what it is, and failure to follow these rules makes the experience less enjoyable for the other players.

Another viewpoint is the measure in which the activity has a goal that extends beyond Second Life. When the casual resident explores the world of Second Life this does not affect his activities in the real world. It only costs him the time that he uses to be entertained by logging on to Second Life. Likewise, the RPG gamers may have rules to enhance their experiences in Second Life, but in the end it is still a form of entertainment that does not grant any reward outside the world of Second Life. A resident who logs on and learns to create 3D objects can use these skills outside of Second Life in 3D modeling tools. If this user uses the learned skills to create objects that other users actually want to buy he can even earn L\$ and make a profit. The skills learned and the profit, which can be converted from L\$ to US\$ are useful outside of Second Life.

To get an overview of the different applications of Second Life by its users these two viewpoints can be used to make a 2-dimensional model where the two axes correspond to the two viewpoints:

Lighthearted vs. Serious:

- A lighthearted, playful application imposes no rules over the user's behavior.
- A serious application typically has rules of conduct and an expected behavior by the user.

Entertaining vs. Rewarding:

- While entertainment can be a reward in itself, here we mean that an entertaining application does not yield any rewards other than entertainment of the user.
- Rewarding applications teach the user skills or earn him a profit that can be used outside of Second Life. Whether or not an activity is rewarding sometimes depends on the user's intent. If a user spends time learning to build amazing objects in Second Life but does not want to sell them to make a profit, then the activity was more entertaining than rewarding. Also, some rewarding tasks can be very fun/entertaining to perform. In the case of this model we will primarily measure the reward that is associated with the application.

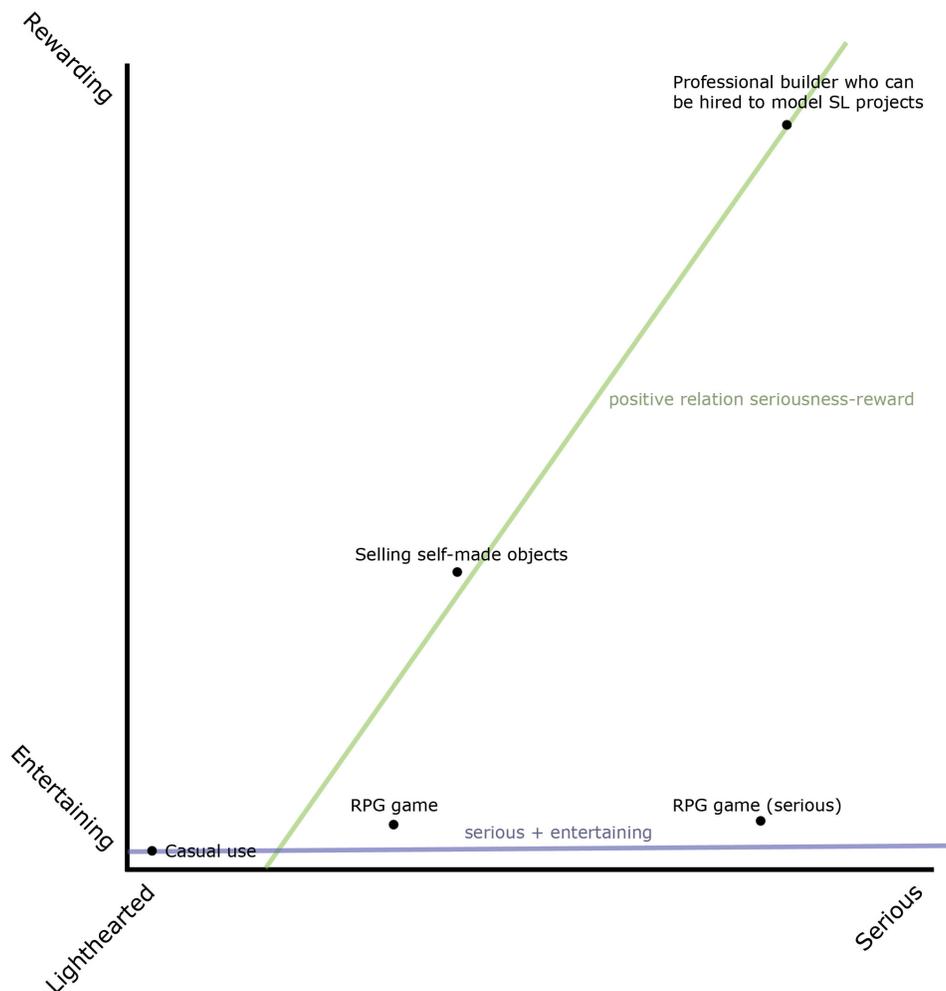


Figure 2: A model for applications of Second Life

This model (figure 1) is more relative than absolute. The reason is that one very important value, the reward, cannot be measured exactly, since some rewarding tasks, like the educational aspect or virtual decision making processes cannot be expressed

in terms of money. There is of course a kind of diagonal upward line, here shown in green, that shows that more work means greater rewards.

Some gamers that use Second Life freely choose to make Second Life as a game more serious to them. This does not in itself grant any reward, thus that line, shown in blue, remains horizontal. The opposite, a trend that rewards greatly for the mere entertainment derived from the Second Life experience does not exist, because there's just no such thing as a free lunch.

Open source client code

In January 2007, Linden Lab made the Second Life client source code available to the public for use within the guidelines of the GNU GPL version 2. This makes it possible for third parties to start developing and distributing their own versions of the client software. If the added features of these modified versions are approved by Linden Lab they are incorporated in the next official build.

One such project, called libsecondlife⁽¹¹⁾, started half a year before the code was made open source, but was already supported by Linden Lab. Libsecondlife is a library that was made to be used in third party applications which communicates with the Second Life simulation servers. It gained much attention for its use in the controversial CopyBot, originally developed by the libsecondlife developers as a debugging tool⁽¹²⁾. Using libsecondlife, CopyBot can duplicate any object, texture or even a complete avatar from the world, which is problem in a world where objects remain the intellectual property of their original creators and are sold for L\$.

Suffice to say that the transition to open source software is a big step, and that this copyright infringement is one of the biggest problems Linden Lab has to face, because in the end all object data that is processed by the client to be viewed on-screen can be duplicated.

Open source server code

Making the client code open source has been a big step for Linden Lab, but a necessary one, because they plan on making the simulator server code open source in the future as well.

In the current situation, where the Second Life servers are managed by Linden Lab, all object data is stored on their servers, making up the Second Life grid. Open source server code would allow users to start hosting their own private simulator servers and, more importantly, give them control over whoever is present on their private server, leaving owners free to duplicate, store and modify content that is created or passed through their private servers.

Some of the comments made by Linden Lab at the 'Platforms and Technologies Panel' for the Virtual Worlds Conference 2007^(13, VW07 panel) about the future of Second Life clearly indicate that the growing user base is beginning to become too big a load for on single server grid:

“We’ll be delivering assets in a totally different method that won’t be such a burden on the simulators. Very soon we’ll be updating simulators to support multiple versions so that we don’t have to update the entire Grid at once.”

The obvious solution to this scalability issue is a distributed server architecture. This will ultimately lead to Second Life being a fully distributed 3D virtual world^(14, ‘Second Life to open-source grid; Will Google bite?’), much like the Internet in it’s current form, with servers all over the (real) world.

“We’ll be open-sourcing the back end so sims can run anywhere on any machine whether trusted by us or not.”

The issue of trust and security is important, but Linden Lab states that they are not to be seen as a kind of police force for Second Life, but rather as providers of services. In the end, as with the rest of the Internet, responsibility always lies with the user.

“Second Life cannot truly succeed as long as one company controls the Grid.”

--Joe Miller, vp for platform and technology development at Linden Lab

Linden Lab won’t be the only company that sells virtual land. This is of course merely another way of saying they rent out server processing capability. Other companies will have the possibility to compete. In the end, Linden Lab is likely to become the developer of standards for the whole of Second Life, much like what the W3C is for the World Wide Web.

Integrating Web 2.0 services into Second Life: Mashups

A popular trend with Second Life is the merging of existing web services with the virtual world. These mergings are called mashups and they are generally seen as the latest possibility to use Web 2.0 content in Second Life^(15, ‘Web 2.0 + Second Life = Virtual World mashups!’). Mashups have become possible since as of version 1.10, the Second Life client’s Linden Scripting Language (LSL) got its own HTTPRequest feature⁽¹⁶⁾, which can be used to request information via HTTP. So while mashups generally indicate World Wide Web content that is displayed in Second Life, some work the other way around, displaying Second Life content on the web, without using the Second Life client software. In general it could mean any communication of information from the World Wide Web to Second Life or vice versa. What is presented next is a list of mashup applications currently developed. The flow of information is indicated in the figures. Some of these tools were written by Linden Lab itself.

Displaying photos from Flickr in Second Life

Using the HTTPRequest feature, Matt Biddulph from *Hackdiary*⁽¹⁷⁾ has succeeded in displaying photos from photo sharing website Flickr⁽¹⁸⁾ in Second Life, Albeit through a webserver that makes the invoking of the Flickr API more managable.

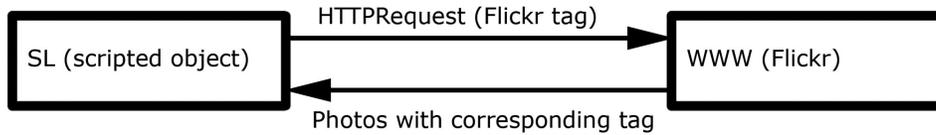


Figure 3: data flow (LSL script - flickr)

SLurl

The SLurl⁽¹⁹⁾ (Second Life url) was developed by Linden Lab and allows teleportation to in-world locations from the World Wide Web. A SLurl points to a location within Second Life. It consists of a region name and x-y-z-coordinates:

`http://slurl.com/secondlife/<region>/<x-coordinate>/<y-coordinate>/<z-coordinate>`

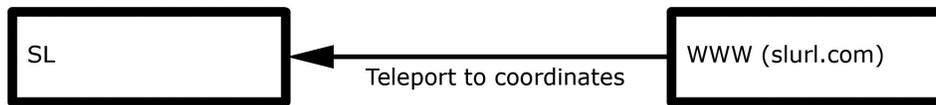


Figure 4: data flow (Second Life - slurl)

Slurlmarker

Slurlmarker combines the functionality of del.icio.us⁽²⁰⁾ and Second Life. It is a Second Life tool that enables its user to bookmark locations as SLurls. These bookmarks (SLurls) are stored in del.icio.us as urls with the tag Slurlmarker and can be teleported to if the Second Life client is installed.



Figure 5: data flow (slurlmarker object - del-icio-us)

Webmap API

The Webmap API⁽²¹⁾ is a project of Linden Lab that is currently still in beta stage. Using javascript, an interactive map of the grid can be viewed. This map can contain markers with an attached image of the location in a window.

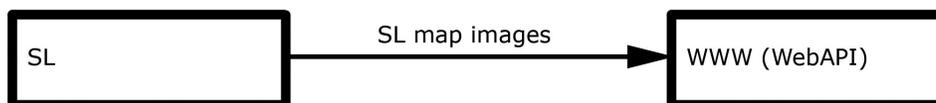


Figure 6: data flow (Second Life servers - Webmap API)

Regapi

Like the Webmap API, the RegAPI⁽²²⁾ is another one of Linden Lab's beta projects with the goal to allow users to implement Second Life account creation on their own website. These accounts' avatars can be tracked by the site's owner. RegAPI essentially creates a unique Second Life name and password, along with an optional starting location for the avatar.

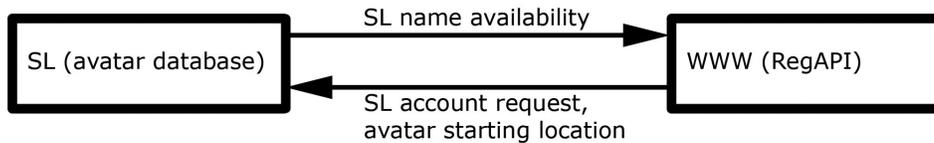


Figure 7 : data flow (Second Life login server - Registration API)

Mashups are not just seen in Second Life. Google maps is often used in mashups on the World Wide Web. Websites like Wikipedia and Panoramio are integrated in Google Earth. The integration of Panoramio and Google Earth was so successful that Google acquired Panoramio in May 2007⁽²³⁾.

Several other web services could produce mashups in Second Life^(24, Eliens et al, 2007). Mashups will play a major part in expanding the functionalities of Second Life in its current state. The Second Life grid still lacks the necessary computing power for possible high-end applications like multiple streaming videos and real-time action game environments, but with the future move to an open standard for Second Life server code, specific demands from these applications could be met with dedicated private servers. This would mean that, as with the World Wide Web, certain areas would have lower production values and thus less visual appeal and performance.

Conclusion

Among all the virtual worlds that exist today, Second Life has the largest user-base. It's competitors, like Active Worlds, the Croquet Project and other virtual worlds all have different strengths, but none match the popularity with the general public and the commercial companies that Second Life has.

Being a 3D rendered virtual environment, Second Life and other 3D worlds have the advantage over 2D virtual worlds like Habbo Hotel⁽²⁵⁾ and Gaia Online⁽²⁶⁾ because of the immersion that a 3D environment has to offer. 2D virtual worlds are often aimed at a younger audience or have a more limited range of applications. A 2D approach is often chosen because of limited resources, or because of a deliberate choice in art style. Second Life still needs to rely on the World Wide Web for the display of information used in mashups. Text will always be 2D, and Second Life does not yet support a user-friendly way of displaying large texts for reading in the client. It might not be as fun as a mashup where you can view photo's in an interactive virtual poster frame, but a solution is an integrated browser in the Second Life client that displays any information a regular browser can. Eventhough a regular browser that might be running in the background, such an integrated browser enhances the immersion of the virtual world. Second Life might be 3D, but in Second Life the World Wide Web can still be represented in 2D.

The Open Source Metaverse Project

The Open Source Metaverse Project (OSMP)⁽²⁷⁾ aims to create a metaverse client that is compatible with all the big virtual worlds like Second Life, There and Active Worlds. The information in each metaverse will be rendered differently depending on the settings of the client, but the key is that a user should be able to travel from one virtual world to the other. The different metaverse servers (Second Life, Active Worlds, etc.) could be compared to separate web servers.

One important factor is that the virtual world server code must be an open standard. Fortunately, Second Life is about to make that step. In the future, there might no longer be different virtual worlds to choose from. There could be one World Wide Web alongside one virtual world.

Appendix: developing the Second Life viewer

This is a short guide with tips about locations with information on how to develop a modified version of the Second Life client with added features. To develop tools that can be used in the viewer you need to understand the architecture of the software, and there's no better place to start than the Second Life Open Source Portal. This portal is a part of the Second Life Wiki⁽²⁸⁾, which also contains portals to Web Services for Second Life, a guide to LSL and more Second Life community services. The Open Source Portal is divided into two sections called 'Learn' and 'Participate.' Participating means downloading and testing beta builds of the Second Life viewer, while learning focusses on the development of the viewer software.

Learn

This section is all about understanding the way Second Life software works. The Second Life viewer is written in C++.

Features

A feature ontology from a user's perspective.

Viewer architecture

Descriptions of every component in the viewer.

Learn by example (step-by-step examples of developing features in different categories.)

Viewer source code

Description of the client's directory structure.

Server architecture

Description of Second Life server components.

Protocol documentation

Illustrates all communication between the client and the servers.

Third party libraries

A list of all known third party libraries that are used with second life. Listed with each library is whether or not they are GPL-compatible and if not if they are covered under the Linden Lab FLOSS License Exception (for software that is free but not GPL-compatible).

Licensing

Information about using licensed software in Second Life, GPL-compatibility and the abovementioned FLOSS exception.

Second Life coding standard

Definitions and formalizations of the style of code produced at Linden Lab.

Roadmap

List of immediate Second Life viewer projects by Linden Lab.

Participate

This section focusses on the official Second Life viewer. Users without programming skills can test the test build and experiment with it. Developers can submit code to fix bugs or fill feature requests.

Communicating with the developers

SLDev@lists.secondlife.com is a high-traffic mailing list. Summaries can be found at http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/SLDev_Traffic. Technical issues can be discussed at the technical forums (<http://forums.secondlife.com>). Direct communication is possible via IRC (<irc://irc.efnet.org/#opensl>)

Filing and vetting bugs

Second Life has an issue tracker database that contains all known issues with the viewer, both bugs and feature requests (<http://jira.secondlife.com>). Testers are encouraged to check and reproduce bugs.

Submit code

Submitted code can fall in the following categories: bug fix, crash report, implementation of a feature request or application profiling.

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