

1.4 development(s) – convergence in second life

As indicated in the preface, developments in *new media* never stop. On the contrary. At the time of writing, I consider both the (bewildering) offerings at youtube¹ and the (outright surprising) growth of secondlife² to be (the) most spectacular. What to do with *youtube* is another story. Let's start with Second Life.

I first heard about Second Life in the *crossmedia week*³ PICNIC'06. When I was asked, in december 2006, to join a project to bring our university into Second Life, I was happy to do so. The result of our efforts is well expressed in the following quote from Mashups:

第二生命

Second Life seems to be overtaking the world. In the whole range of community-building platforms, Second Life stands out as an immersive 3D world with an almost stunning adoption, by both individuals, companies and institutions, followed attentively by the Press. Not entirely without an understanding of the value of press coverage, the VU University Amsterdam decided to create presence in Second Life, by creating a virtual campus, to realize a (virtual) community of learners, VUSL. And, indeed, we succeeded in being the first university in The Netherlands with presence in Second Life and, as hoped, this was covered in the 8 o'clock nation-wide TV news.



(a) visitors outside



(b) visitors inside

1

It is indeed rewarding, once and a while, to enter the media circus. But of course, as (more or less) respectable academics, we are more serious than that. So, Mashups continued: More substantial than getting into a nation-wide television broadcast, however, is our aim to communicate our institutional goals, *creating a community of learners*, by creating a virtual campus in Second Life, offering an *information portal* as well as a *meeting point*, in a media platform that is widely adopted by our target community. Virtual presence in Second

¹youtube.com

²secondlife.com

³crossmediaweek.org

Life, obviously, is not enough. The relatively long history of virtual worlds has shown that lack of interesting content and functionality easily leads to boredom, desinterest, and hence *churn*, users dropping off. As a consequence, there is a need for sustainable functionality, that both motivates people to come back and participate, and, otherwise why choose Second Life, makes essential use of the 3D immersive environment offered by Second Life. In Mashups, we further wrote: *we will explore how to use web services in meaningful compositions or mashups to enhance our presence in Second Life, and create a community where visitors actively participate in both education and research*, in other words, indeed, *a community of learners*.

How we did or would like to explore that will be dealt with later, see part v. Now it might be more worthwhile to look at what made Second Life, so suddenly, so popular, and what the future of Second Life, and possibly the Web, which according to some is threatened to be overtaken by Second Life, might look like.

In VUSL, we discussed the success factors of Second Life. We asked ourselves: will Second Life become the new (immersive 3D) mass medium of our participatory culture of the 21th century, as once the immersive *panorama* was the propaganda/art medium for the masses in the 19th century? Cf. VirtualArt. In thinking about possible reasons why Second Life is so successful, we observed that Second Life does provide:

- convergence of social networking and content creation
- immersive networked 3D environment
- inclusion of elementary economic principles

However, we also see that other factors may contribute to the success of Second Life, such as:

- don't miss the boat effect
- free and easy accessible 3D design tool set
- adoption by big companies like IBM, Reebok, ...
- marketing of Second Life by Linden Lab (?)
- the promise to make (real) money (?)

According to Philip Rosedale, CEO of Linden Lab, (interview in .NET magazine, issue 158, January 2007) the success of SL is due to the fact that (1) it offers a set of capabilities, which are in many different ways superior to the real world, (2) the decision to allow residents to own the intellectual property rights to their creations and (3) because Second Life is full of creative possibilities, and opportunities for innovation.

In order to establish what constitutes the success of Second Life in a more rigorous manner, we must subject Second Life to a (game) *reference model* as introduced in HalfReal, see also section 12.1, which we have also applied to (serious) service management games in Serious, see section 11.1. A first tentative characterization of Second Life according to our reference model would be:

reference model

- *rules* – construct and communicate!

- *outcome* – a second world
- *value* – virtual and real (monetary) rewards
- *effort* – requires elementary skills
- *attachment* – a virtual identity
- *consequences* – transfer to first life

Second Life clearly has a wider scope and more freedom than just gaming. Apart from elementary rules, that more or less require of the (serious) visitor to *construct and communicate*, there are almost no fixed rules, no in-game strategies, but many opportunities for inter-personal contact and the establishment of relations worldwide, affecting (possibly) the Second Lifer's first life (*consequences*). Whether Second Life will turn out to be a veritable media-supported augmentation of our first life, cf. DeepTime, remains to be seen. Chances are also that Second Life will end up as another item on the *dead media project(s)* list, see section 11.1, to be replaced by an alternative participatory framework or environment.

The reference model we introduced in VUSL, will be explained in more detail in chapter 12. Obviously, to establish the value of Second Life, or any game whatsoever, in a more objective manner, some reference model is needed. Here it suffices to see how the reference model expresses why second life might be worthwhile, possibly as an alternative to *first life*, which evidently is not at all times rewarding or even satisfactory!

So far, our story about how we brought the VU on or into (its) *Second Life* is full of the techno-euforia so often encountered in these stories. But, in all our enthusiasm, as we did indeed enjoy the project and the challenge to be on time, on time to get into the 8 o'clock news, we do well at taking a step back, and look at our exercise from a more critical perspective.

At some point in my career I gave a talk entitled *what led me to multimedia?*, with as a subtitle *and where does multimedia lead me?*, indicating my doubts about how *multimedia* would fit in the academic curriculum, and for that matter, in my own (academic) career. Generalizing this perspective, we may ask ourselves *what led us to second life*, and *where will second life lead us?*

With *critical perspective*, I mean the perspective of *critical theory*, which is characterized in InformationArts as the discipline(s) that

critical theory

attempt(s) to link the arts, literature, media studies, politics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and technology in an interdisciplinary search for relevant concepts and frameworks with which to understand the current world.

Often the findings of (researches from) critical theory may sound poetic in themselves, for example, quoting Lev Manovich's *Labor of Vision* from InformationArts:

contemporary perception(s)

... in the contemporary world, the perceptual task has changed, in both leisure and work, to monitor data displays, ready for events.

Nevertheless, such statements indicate how much the current (ICT & media) developments affect our lives, and even touch upon epistemological issues questioning what is our *reality*. See section 11.3 for more on this topic.

A more direct and perhaps sobering analysis is given in Richard barbrook's and Andy cameron's essay *The Californian Dream* which according to InformationArts states:

californian dream(s)

... the new faith has emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the high-tech industries of Silocon Valley...

and, to further de-construct the *digital utopianism*:

... the californian ideology promiscuously combines the freewheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of of the yuppies

Now you may find the implied accusation of american imperialism exaggerated, but still, as testified by recent attempts to give the *creative industry* in the Amsterdam area a push, the bay area (San Francisco and Silicon Valley) still play a leading role and act as model for the combination of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship around the world!. Another implication is also worthwhile to consider, since it seems to directly affect our personal life, as members of the *digital class*. As phrased in InformationArts:

digital class

... the shadow side of the digital class's freedom and individuality is a lack of connection ... and an unrealized acceptance of work as the main life value.

In the light of these remarks it is doubtful whether it is really such a privilege to belong to the *digital class* and/or to work in the *new media* or *creative industry*. That is a matter of personal choice, I would see, and I can only encourage anyone to get (academic) training and pursue a career in this area. After all, that is my living!

In the line of critical theory, it is at this moment appropriate to look at another quote, again taken from InformationArts, a quote that exemplifies *cyberfeminist critique*;

cyberfeminism(s)

... empowerment of women in the field of new electronic media can only result from the demystification of technology and the appropriation of access to (these) tools.

However, it would be fundamentally wrong, in my opinion, not to extend this emancipatoric advice to both genders, of all cultures. Access to tools and demystification of technology seems to be benifial for all, and possibly the only way to survive in our (information) society that is increasingly being dominated by (digital) culture. Or was it lack of culture?