



## **Is Your Child Living in a Virtual World?**

If you are a parent of a child who uses the Internet you are well aware of the dangers lurking in social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. While social networking websites continue to pose a threat to children if not used properly, there is another online movement that is gaining substantial popularity; virtual worlds.

Although there are at least thirty different virtual world websites, for the purposes of this article I am going to focus on the most popular one known as Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)). Second Life describes itself as a, "3-D virtual world created by its Residents"<sup>1</sup>. A virtual world is defined as, "an interactive simulated environment accessed by multiple users through the Internet."<sup>2</sup>

Second Life allows users to create a free profile (although they do offer a pay service as well) and avatar to portray their virtual person. An avatar is a visible representation of the user and can be made to look like anything the user wants. Once the user or "resident" creates their avatar they can walk throughout different areas of Second Life and meet other residents, visit businesses, purchase goods and property, or just hang out.

Residents do have to spend real money if they want to purchase property or some other items for their virtual homes, businesses, or avatars. Second Life (created by a company called Linden Labs) has their own currency called Linden dollars which has an exchange rate of about 250 Linden dollars per US Dollar. Residents can pay real money using a credit card to "bank" Linden dollars in order to buy any number of items. Users can also go to other websites outside of Second Life and buy things to be used within Second Life.

If you think that this sounds like a fun game for a few bucks a month, keep reading. In July 2008 Linden Labs estimated they have 14 million registered users and at any given time there are 60,000 residents in Second Life. The economics within Second Life is amazing. People are actually quitting their regular jobs to have "virtual" shops within Second Life and selling virtual property to other residents. For example, if a resident finds a pair of virtual shoes they would like to buy for their avatar they can negotiate with the resident selling the shoes, then transfer Linden dollars to them using a service like PayPal. It is estimated that just in the month of June 2008 \$29 million dollars of user to user transactions occurred within Second Life.

Companies such as IBM, Nike, Toyota and others are actually purchasing virtual land within Second Life to build products and float their ideas to the millions of Second Life residents before spending too much time and money in developing physical products. Religious and nonprofit organizations and education institutions have also begun to spring up in Second Life. A resident can see a church service, political debate, or attend a real class within Second Life.

Second Life residents can walk, fly, or teleport themselves throughout the Second Life world. A resident can find other residents and chat with them in real-time and do any activity that is imaginable. Second Life has night clubs, sports activities, restaurants, hotels and anything else that a resident can dream of.

A virtual community such as this poses many challenges to parents and law enforcement. How is revenue generated in Second Life taxed? What law enforcement agency is supposed to investigate crimes that occur in a “virtual world”? How do parents know where their children are within a virtual world? How do you know who your child is talking to and meeting in Second Life?

There is certainly a dark side to virtual worlds like Second Life. Sex, drugs and violence are all present within Second Life and children can be exposed to sexually explicit material. Within Second Life there are strip clubs, sex shops and even sex parties. Residents can purchase genitalia for their avatars and can have their avatar’s engage in sex acts with other resident’s that they meet. There are even documented cases of individuals who have experimented with sexual behaviors in Second Life such as homosexuality, rape and group sex just to see what it would be like. It is also possible for an adult to create a child avatar and there have been incidents of people using child avatars in virtual sex acts with adult avatars.

Second Life does try to keep minors from seeing explicit conduct; however they have no way of verifying the age of all residents. By doing a YouTube search it is easy to find videos of Second Life residents involved in suicide, assaults, sex, drug use, homicide bombing and other inappropriate behavior. If you are going to allow your child to participate in a website such as this it is critically important to ensure they are registered as a minor and only allowed to be in areas dedicated to minors. There really is no sure way to keep your child safe on sites such as this except for you to be with them the entire time. Nothing prevents an adult from posing as a minor just to be in the same virtual area as all the children.

For further information about Internet safety or to read our archive of past articles, please visit the Southern Oregon High-Tech Crimes Task Force website at [www.HighTechCops.com](http://www.HighTechCops.com).

<sup>1</sup>Official Second Life website at <http://secondlife.com/whatis/>

<sup>2</sup>Virtual Worlds Review, What is a Virtual World?,<http://www.virtualworldsreview.com/info/whatis.shtml>.

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