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CHAPTER 7

# Trends

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hat comes after Web 2.0? Two of the trends that have been identified are metaverses or virtual worlds and Artificial Intelligence thanks to [Web semantics](#).

The move towards consolidation of virtual worlds is an Internet phenomenon. Several examples already exist, such as [WhyVille](#), [Second Life](#), [Habbo and The Sims Online](#). All the evidence suggests that by 2011, four out of every five Internet users will be actively participating in a virtual world.

Users have opposing reactions to these virtual worlds. On the one hand there are the enthusiasts, who predicate the social and business potential and the possibilities for individual and collective creation. On the opposite side of the fence sit the detractors, who find the use of these tools—often slow and complex—to be frustrating. If the user isn't handy with the application, they are condemned to be a "second-rate avatar".

This opposition between the two positions is reproduced in business. Some see the phenomenon as an up-and-coming trend and are eager to join in so as not to miss out on business opportunities; others remember the dot-com bubble and are more reluctant to invest in virtual worlds.

Even the press can't make up its mind, alternately heaping praise and criticism on the concept. For example, *Time* and *Wired*, magazines, having lavished praise on Second Life in 2006, by 2007 were writing it off as "empty" and a "bubble".

As in any process of innovation, opinion swings and uncertainty are the order of the day.

## Notes

Given the impact Second Life has had on the media and business, let's take a close look at this particular case.

Second Life (SL for short) is a virtual 3D world of social interaction created by Linden Lab and founded by Philip Rosedale, distributed across a broad network of servers and accessible over the Internet. The program offers its users (or "residents") tools to create their own identities, change the world and participate in its virtual economy, which is governed by the same rules that operate on the real market.

For users, two of the great appeals of Second Life are a) the fact that you can reinvent yourself by designing a virtual three-dimensional figure (or avatar) which will represent you in that world, and b) the possibility of making money.

Second Life has its own economy and currency, the Linden dollar (L\$), which is used for buying and selling the articles and services created in the virtual world. In the virtual world, there are around 250 Linden dollars to the US dollar.

In mid 2007, there were over 40,000 businesses in Second Life with a positive cash flow and more than 45 multinationals had a presence in the virtual world.

One of the questions most often asked is the real population of this virtual world. Television and newspapers talk about millions of avatars. [Official figures](#) show 8.5 million subscriptions. Of these, only 5.7 are single users (some users have more than one account).

Many [claim](#) that this large number is due to an orchestrated advertising campaign which distorts the real figures, with many users registering once out of curiosity and never entering the world again.

An example of the opposite case is *World of Warcraft*, an online role game similar to Second Life, though without the same media hype, which has already attracted over five million users who pay every month for access.

Behind the great Second Life phenomenon lies a much less surprising situation. It was recently found that 85% of the people registered in the game created by the American company Linden Lab [drop](#) their avatar immediately after creating it. One possible reason for this mass exodus is the complexity of the program: it can take several hours to create a personalised avatar; learning to use the basic tools of Second Life takes at least two hours and the process of getting the most out of the game can take several weeks.

Of the remaining 15% of users –approximately 1.4 million people – not all are regulars. There are normally no more than 35,000 residents at any one time in the various areas of Second Life. Most are looking for a parallel world where they can have fun and do things they can't do in the real world.

Despite the fact the numbers are not what they seem and many multinationals [are leaving](#) Second Life, the media continues to come up with some remarkable [stories](#) such as the birth of the first specialist Spanish communication media, [SecondNews](#), which will report on relevant events in this parallel world; or the fact that Europe's leading vehicle-rental company [Europcar](#) has become the first firm of its kind to recruit employees in Second Life using [InfoJobs](#), Spain's leading employment website—the first portal in the country to open an office in the virtual space

Why should anyone want to invest in this virtual world when so many people seem to be leaving it? More than economic gain, many companies have been attracted by the media impact that involvement in this virtual universe brings. In Spain, where it is still an unusual step for a company to take, any that do open shop in the virtual world are practically guaranteed media coverage. Indeed, it is estimated that 62% of Second Life users in Spain heard about it through the media.

Nonetheless, this strategy is not sustainable in the long term either for the company or for Second Life and companies need to understand that it is first and foremost a social meeting place and therefore a unique opportunity to strike up novel and more direct ties with their customers. This is how business models should be oriented; otherwise, this modern-day bubble will burst.

In Second Life [it is calculated](#) that around six hundred million dollars changes hands every day, so even if the number of users is not as high as it might have seemed or some multinationals are leaving the metaverse, there is still a considerable market out there.

[Paul Fleming](#), president of Barcelona Virtual, says in his interesting [article](#) "La verdad sobre Second Life" that SL is the future of online marketing. He considers it to be a good initiative, despite the relative scarcity of avatars, the barriers to entry and a lack of interesting content. Others, however, run Second Life down simply because they have a vested interest in the success of new and alternative Web 2.0 projects. In the same month that *Wired* criticised Second Life, Newsweek ran a cover story on it, listing the many virtues of the new medium, and the much-respected Economist called it an innovation incubator.

Many companies and users appear to be abandoning Second Life, particularly for two reasons. Firstly, Second Life has invested heavily in technology without asking its users whether it is what they really want or whether they would prefer something simpler. Secondly, because the virtual world is entirely unmanaged, the company is letting go some very valuable information on its users, their tastes and their needs, and thus possible means of ensuring loyalty.

Nonetheless, there is a market, and the potential of Second Life is vast, so if the focus were on basic services, and investment was extended in accordance with user demand, Second Life could have an influential place on the Internet.

As we have already said, the sustainability of Web 2.0 business models depends largely on **having active users and satisfying their needs**. To discover how this story ends, we will have to wait and see whether, despite having fewer

active users than previously announced, Second Life will learn to listen to them and whether, once the hype is over, the real number of users increases and the volume of transactions continues to grow.

One example of a successful virtual world is [Whyville](#). As already mentioned, this is an educational platform targeted at children aged between 8 and 15, parents and teachers.

**Education tends to be a participative process** in which knowledge is generated from group communication and the teacher takes on a purely support role for students.

Whyville perfectly matches this trend, providing a tool that children can use to learn about eating habits, art, mathematics and physics, by carrying out specific tasks in groups.

Because it simulates a real environment, the student can also experience and learn in a different, fun and appealing way, based on practice, in a highly controlled environment with continuous monitoring.

The success of this educational platform lies in its capacity to adapt to some of the new trends (digital education and virtual worlds), thus satisfying the demand of its users.

As well as the virtual worlds, there is a move towards **the semantic web**, which is being developed by Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. The underlying idea came from the origins of the Internet.

With rare exceptions, contents posted in websites are difficult for computers to understand and are only meaningful to real people. The aim, therefore, is to add new information in a computer-comprehensible structure. Computers could emulate and improve knowledge acquisition by the user, using artificial intelligence, so that machines could **"think"** and make websites meaningful; hence the name, the semantic web.

In contrast to implicit semantics, the chaotic growth of resources and the absence of a clear organisation in the existing web, the aim of the semantic web is to classify, structure and annotate the resources using explicit machine-processable semantics.

This will not be easy. The transition from the existing web to the semantic web may come at a very high cost in time, effort and resources, given the volume of content that already forms part of the web. It will therefore be necessary to find a way of automating the conversion process, albeit only partially.



### Semantic web

**The semantic web** is an extension of the World Wide Web, with a higher level of significance, in which any Internet user can find answers to their questions in a faster and more simple way thanks to better defined information.

Another major difficulty in creating the semantic web will be to reach a consensus on idea association in a community, since the perception of the world varies between different people. For example, a dietician and a biologist both have a knowledge of plants, but they represent the subject very differently and it would probably be wrong to impose the same representation for both groups.

Despite the complexity and the cost involved, there is great interest in the corporate world, the public sector and academia in making the semantic web happen, since it is seen as being an important development for the future progress of the information society.

Although it is not clear when it will be developed and exactly what form it will take, use of the term Web 3.0 has spread like wildfire and it is predicted that, in a not too distant future, virtual networks will be intelligent enough to make a semantic composition of websites.

In the future, the Web will be an intelligent virtual world, in which our avatars will move and act in accordance with our data and our habits. The concept of static information, as in books, articles and images, will be replaced by knowledge flow.

The avatars will be in charge of bringing us the type of news we generally read and advertising products of interest to us, educating us in areas that might be useful to us and socialising with people who have shared affinities and interests. It will be a **participative, intelligent and effective web** which will save us time and provide us with an **unlimited flow of knowledge**.

Notes

A large area of dotted lines for taking notes.