THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF
COMMUNICATION IN VIRTUAL SPACES:
MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF SECOND LIFE, 2002-2008

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As modern culture begins to embrace the Internet as a social medium, new programs

such as Linden Lab's Second Life raise questions about what an audience can expect

from new interactive media. By utilizing the media studies theory of Uses and

Gratifications, this paper analyzes media coverage of Second Life over six years, from

its earliest roots to its modern state as an interactive virtual world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I. Introduction

There really isn't anything in the world quite like Second Life. Perhaps that is due to the fact that Second Life is an entire world of its own.

Created by San Francisco-based Internet firm Linden Lab, Second Life is an online application that connects millions of users in a virtual world where seemingly anything is possible. Virtual goods and services are bought and sold on a real-life economy, social and business events are always on the calendar, and each user has the ability to go just about anywhere and create just about anything he or she could imagine.

Although Second Life is arguably in its infancy, having existed for just five years, it has grown from 64 virtual acres of landscape when it began in 2003 to more than 65,000 in 2008.[1] People from varying backgrounds and professions have taken an interest in the possibilities offered by the online collaborative world of Second Life, and the media has taken notice. For as long as Second Life has existed, the media has been there to cover its development and discuss its potential uses and how it delivers on them.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the manner in which the mass media has portrayed Second Life, an online interactive and collaborative application, from 2002 – Second Life's first public coverage – to its current state in 2008. In doing so, the Uses and Gratifications model of media study is utilized and adapted to suit the nature of the topic.

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[1] Second Life official website. http://www.secondlife.com/

What is Second Life?

Put simply, Second Life is a downloadable program that people can use to explore a virtual, three-dimensional world online along with other users. Each user creates an avatar, which is a virtual representation of him- or herself, and navigates through the virtual world by walking, running, swimming and even flying. Users can communicate with other people by typing or speaking through a microphone or headset.

Unlike a videogame, Second Life was created without any distinct goals or objectives. Instead, users are given the tools to build and share objects in the virtual world. As a result, friendships have been forged, creativity has been shared, and money has been exchanged countless times between users in Second Life.

The Uses and Gratifications Framework

In brief, Uses and Gratifications is a model of media study that examines why people use media and what they gain from putting forth the effort and energy to do so. Essentially, Uses and Gratifications' purpose is to identify and explain the appeal of certain media, and why a consumer chooses one medium and disregards the others. For example, a study in Uses and Gratifications may hypothetically seek to establish why television news audiences are growing as newspaper subscriptions are dwindling. Besides being a well-known and debated format for media studies, it has seen renewed interest in the Internet age.

Because this study examines documents dating from before Second Life's launch to its current state (2002-2008) and because of Second Life's demanding barriers to entry (a fast computer and some significant tech savvy) it can be assumed that

Second Life offers significant and particular gratifications to reward its users for the difficulty in arriving at those gratifications. The specifics of the model are explained in section II of this essay.

Expected outcome

Based on the variety of sources that have covered Second Life over the years, I expected that several key gratifications would emerge as dominant themes in the media's Second Life depictions. I sought to determine what the key motivating factor behind each gratification was and use them as a framework for analyzing each individual story or article or work.

II. Literature review

Studying the impact and reception of Second Life through the lens of the media requires some prior assumptions and explanations. First, the Uses and Gratifications model of media study must be explained in greater detail, and then its relevance to modern media must be proved.

Origins of the Uses and Gratifications theory

Ever since media studies emerged as an academic interest, the question of how to best qualitatively measure media use has gone without a consistent answer. One theory that emerged in 1974 by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz examines media consumption by how it is consumed and what benefits it creates for the consumer.[2] This framework, which has come to be known as the Uses and Gratifications model, has been repeatedly tested and contested for more than 30 years. In its original format, the theory consisted of five key elements:

1. The audience is assumed to be an active user of mass media

2. Each audience member must discern which medium will best gratify his or her needs for a given use

3. Media outlets compete with other sources of gratification, and media cannot satisfy all human needs

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[2] Blumler, Jay G. and Katz, Elihu. *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research.* Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1974.

4. Empirical data assessment can help determine the goals of mass media consumers since users are self-aware enough to accurately describe their motives

5. Judgments about the cultural relevance of mass media must be withheld in order to avoid speculation on popular culture[3]

Typical gratifications for media use can be logically linked to a person's basic needs. Media consumers often seek basic gratifications like education, entertainment and information on current events from major media sources. In studying Second Life's portrayal in the media, however, several different sorts of gratifications emerged that, while similar to other media usage, are specifically tailored to the free-form nature of Second Life.

Currently, Uses and Gratification is considered to be an important method in analyzing and understanding trends in usage for internet-based media.[4] This is largely due to how well a Web user's usage habits align with the expectations of Uses and Gratifications studies; specifically, Web users are actively pursuing gratification through the Internet. There is no automatic gratification, because a user must first actively seek out whatever he or she is searching for before that need is gratified. Because of the relative effort needed for gratification online as compared to picking up a newspaper or turning on a television, it is also assumed that the user has discerned that

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

[4] Stafford, Thomas F. and Schkade, Lawrence L. "Determining Uses and Gratifications for the Internet." *Decision Sciences* Spring 2004, Vol. 35 no. 2, p. 259-80.

the Web will better gratify his or her need, simply because there is typically more of a barrier to access than with older, conventional media. These two assertions align well with the first two points of the Uses and Gratifications model proposed by Blumler and Katz as mentioned previously.

The Uses and Gratifications theory has been debated as to its accuracy and relevance in evaluating an audience's utilization of mass media.[5] However, many media scholars and economists continue to contend that the Uses and Gratifications theory is a legitimate vehicle for assessing user activity in different media, including modern media. New theories have emerged regarding the role of the Internet in the mass media, suggesting that in addition to usage process and derived content gratifications, a new and vital social gratification is critical to evaluating Internet use.[6] Others have suggested that Uses and Gratifications research has withstood the test of time as the best method for approaching a new medium, and the rise of the Internet in society has prompted a renaissance in Uses and Gratifications research.[7]

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[5] Ruggiero, Thomas E. "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century." *Mass Communication & Society* Winter 2000, Vol. 3 no. 1, p. 3.

[6] Stafford, Thomas F. and Schkade, Lawrence L. "Determining Uses and Gratifications for the Internet." *Decision Sciences* Spring 2004, Vol. 35 no. 2, p. 259.

[7] Ruggiero, Thomas E. "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century." *Mass Communication & Society* Winter 2000, Vol. 3 no. 1, p. 3.

Primary and secondary sources

In order to frame a study of the media's depictions of Second Life, the logical approach was to break sources up into primary and secondary sources. Because the media's perspective is being analyzed in this essay to derive perceived gratifications obtained from using Second Life, media publications – books, articles, television shows, radio broadcasts, Web content – are all considered primary sources.

The sources that help explain the framework of the study itself are considered secondary sources. These may be resources that explain the Uses and Gratifications model, blogs, specialized books on the subject of Second Life, etc.

Analyzing primary sources

Second Life is a new and dynamic application, and these traits are reflected in its media coverage. Because it is a relatively new experience in many ways, and because it offers a great deal of freedom and potential for personal gain and gratification, Second Life has been covered in a wide variety of publications and news outlets across hundreds of stories, interviews and editorials. However, for the purposes of this study, two factors were used as a primary guide for organizing and breaking down results: **audience** and **timeline**.

To study the media's perceptions and depictions of Second Life, a broad range of sources were collected and analyzed based on the article's intended audience. Almost every publication has a mission statement and a clearly defined audience, ranging from general interest newspapers to highly technical specialized magazines and newsletters. Because Second Life is a dynamic tool with many potential uses and

applications, much has been written on the subject from a wide variety of perspectives. As a result, many of the sources examined include hard news stories from newspapers and news agencies as well as more specialized, longer articles in special-interest magazines.

The second critical factor concerns when the article was published. Second Life officially went live as an active service in 2003, but it received coverage in numerous publications as far back as early 2002, when the application was still called "LindenWorld." And since Second Life launched, it has continued to evolve in new directions, prompting continued coverage from varying perspectives.

A great deal of information on the purpose of an article can be inferred based upon when the article was published and where it was published. An article in a publication like *BusinessWeek* that deals with marketing in Second Life is more than likely written to aid a reader interested in the business and/or financial benefits of using Second Life.

Conventional media coverage

There is a wide variety of media outlets that have covered Second Life. Television news networks, both local and international, have shown stories on the program. A variety of books have been written about Second Life, ranging from get-rich-quick guides to learning how to deck one's avatar in the most fashionable of virtual clothing.

Even before its debut in 2003, Second Life had picked up a wide array of media coverage. General interest publications such as *Time* and the *New York Times* were

singing its praises as early as February of 2002, back when Linden Lab was a fledgling company and Second Life was tentatively named "LindenWorld."

Educators and scholars have taken notice of the innovative concepts in Second Life, and many schools – including the University of Oregon – have implemented classes that operate in and around Second Life. A great deal has been written about these programs by mainstream and specialized journalists as well as by the professors who designed and teach the courses.

Many newspapers and magazines, such as *USA Today* and *BusinessWeek*, have taken a particular interest in the business and marketing potential within Second Life. Additionally, a practical subset of the self-help book market has been developed for Second Life users with aspirations ranging from meeting people and making friends to becoming a virtual real estate tycoon.

Despite the massive exposure Second Life has received from the mainstream and specialized press, a study of the program would be incomplete without the unique benefits of blogs.

Blogs and Web-based media

A weblog, or "blog," is a broad term used to define an Internet-based publication that is updated regularly. Although blogs are used for a massive number of reasons, there is a fairly consistent understanding of what a blog is and is not. As business communications professor Barbara Moran sees it:

Blog sites are Websites where you register as a member, type, hit an upload button, and your work is immediately published for all the world to see.

Blogging is being heralded not only by writers, but by businesses that find it a good way to build a more personal relationship with employees and customers. It's like maintaining a diary, a novella, or an ongoing correspondence with the public.[8]

Many popular blogging sites, such as Blogger and LiveJournal, got their start in 1999, and the popularity of blogging has escalated ever since. But as the number of blogs and bloggers began to rapidly increase, and the lines between blogger and journalist blurred, many began to wonder what sort of impact blogs were having – and who was writing them.

David Sifry founded a website called Technorati to tracks blog use trends and popularity. Currently, there is no consistent figure on the number of active blogs – those blogs that continue to be updated – on the Web. Estimates range widely; Technorati recently claimed to be tracking 112.8 million blogs.[9]

Blogs embody the collaborative spirit of Web 2.0, a buzzword to describe a World Wide Web composed of media created by users for other users. Because Second Life is a massive virtual environment based around user interaction, it makes sense that those very same users would participate in similar collaborative techniques in online media, such as blogs and podcasts – regularly produced and distributed radio show-like audio files.

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[8] Moran, Barbara. *Crafting Multimedia Text: Websites and Presentations.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2005, p. 11.

[9] "Technorati: About Us." http://www.technorati.com/about/

There are a number of regularly created and distributed podcasts centered around Second Life, such as Linden Lab's official "In the Lab" podcast. There are also many podcasts created and recorded by fans of Second Life, such as those documented at the Second Life Podcast Network.[10] These new media offer specialized, up to date coverage that journalists in older media cannot keep up with, and they carry more distinct and varied voices than news writing is known for.[11]

Terminology

As with any distinct field of study, the videogame industry is rife with internal jargon and intricate concepts that are typically regarded as common knowledge among those who are "in the know." These concepts are, of course, daunting and off-putting to any newcomers to the field.

In 2007, several prominent videogame writers compiled *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual*. "A consistent style," the authors write, "helps engender trust from readers, and, on a larger scale, lend legitimacy to our industry."[12] This volume was created to address the critical flaws in modern videogame journalism and to help elevate videogame writers to a high standard of professionalism.

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[10] "SLPN – Podcasts for the Metaverse." http://www.slpodcast.net/

[11] Moran, Barbara. *Crafting Multimedia Text: Websites and Presentations.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2005, p. 12.

[12] Thomas, David; Orland, Kyle; and Steinberg, Scott. *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual*, 2007, p. 5. Ebook obtained from http://www.gamestyleguide.com/.

Many people who write about videogames often write very exclusively to their readers. They assume the audience is well-versed in videogames, both in hands-on experience and in reading habits, often drawing on comparisons to other games or utilizing numerous industry buzzwords to describe the elements of a game. This not only creates a divide between gaming enthusiasts and casual readers, but it results in an inconsistent and muddled history of videogames that becomes less viable as time goes on. "In 50 years," the authors say, "if someone looks back at an article that references "SMB," they may well wonder if the author is referring to Super Mario Bros., Super Monkey Ball, [or] the fictitious Sega Marketing Board."[13] For the very same reason, the "use of jargon and technical terms in mainstream contexts is discouraged" as it further alienates the audience from the subject matter.[14]

Included below is a list of several key terms defined in a clear and concise manner. These terms are critical to the study of Second Life and are on the verge of becoming mainstream, but are still primarily found in technology-specific media.

Avatar

In the *Videogame Style Guide*, "avatar" is defined as "the character a player controls in a game, or the personification of a player in a game's world."[15] While any

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[13] *Ibid.,* p. 6

[14] *Ibid.,* p. 6

[15] Thomas, David; Orland, Kyle; and Steinberg, Scott. *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual*, 2007, p. 14. Ebook obtained from http://www.gamestyleguide.com/

player-controlled character can legitimately be referred to as an avatar, it is most commonly associated with characters with customizable traits and attributes that are determined by the player, not the game developer.[16] Many videogames and virtual world applications are populated by player-controlled avatars. However, while most videogames include other characters that were designed and programmed by the game's developer, some applications – such as Second Life – contain only avatars, controlled by real people. Avatars in Second Life are commonly called Residents.

Player and User

While the word "player" may suggest a game, the term is often used interchangeably with "user" in terms of Second Life's audience. Although Second Life is not a game, the interface and framework of the program bear more than a passing resemblance to a videogame; as a result, these terms are both used when discussing Second Life.

Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO)

Massively multiplayer online, or MMO, refers to a genre of game that features "a large number of players interacting in a persistent world through online communication with other players."[17] This term can refer to any game with a persistent world – one that doesn't change when the player is logged out. As mentioned earlier, a subgenre – the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, or MMORPG – has emerged and

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 14

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 77

gained popularity worldwide. Second Life is not technically an MMORPG, nor is it a game at all, but many aspects of those games (socializing, buying/selling/trading, collaborating) are central to Second Life.

Persistent world

A persistent world means exactly what it says: a world that retains its characteristics throughout time. What this means in the realm of MMOs is that the changes and designs that players create in an environment – such as real estate or objects in Second Life – exist permanently on servers and are always available for other users to see, even when the creator isn't actively using the program at the moment. Without persistent worlds, programs like Second Life could not exist. (Also note that "metaverse" is considered an adequate term in describing a virtual persistent world.)

Second Life

Second Life is an online environment where millions of users collaborate, socialize, and interact in a number of ways through the use of their avatars. Developer Linden Lab first opened the gates to its metaverse in 2003, and since then it has become a phenomenon both in its user base and the amount of press coverage it has received. While not a game, Second Life borrows handily from many of the mechanics and ideas expressed in videogames throughout the last few decades, particularly the MMO game genre.

Research questions

Three distinct gratifications can be observed in much of the media's coverage of Second Life. They are:

1. *Social gratification and personal identity* – How does Second Life cater to a user's need for social interaction? How does that interaction develop a user's personal identity?

2. *Business and productivity gratification* – In what ways does Second Life gratify a user's desire to engage in business and trade? How does the application promote productivity in a useful and efficient way?

3. *Educational and research gratification* – How does Second Life promote or facilitate education? How does it enable teachers or students to communicate more effectively? In what ways can the application be harnessed for research and study?

While researching the uses and gratifications of Second Life, I sought to encapsulate my research in a series of brief, distinct questions. These questions are derived from the above gratifications that are present in many media depictions of Second Life.

1. How has the media's portrayal of Second Life evolved over time?

2. How does the media's depiction of Second Life vary based on publication and audience?

3. How do these varying depictions imply the different gratifications that users seek by using Second Life?

III. Methodology

Research approach

With the Uses and Gratifications Theory as the basis for this essay, the next step was to evaluate and discern which sources exemplified evidence of the gratifications focused on in this study. This was done by examining a number of factors, including:

- The medium: Where did the work appear? Which audience is it written for?
- The author: What is his/her background? What would he/she be seeking?
- The publication date: What was happening in popular culture and in technology? What had happened in *Second Life*'s development history up to this point?

With those factors in mind, effective textual analysis was possible.

Textual analysis

In order to analyze each piece, a systematic process was necessary. This consisted of reading each piece both literally and subliminally; that is, reading each word of each sentence as well as establishing the author's subtext based on evidence in the text. By analyzing word choice, topics covered and each author's intent in writing, thorough and conclusive information can be gleaned. Because Second Life's potential is still being explored, one of the most prominent topics being discussed in media today revolves around the possible ways people can use the program in the future; therefore, much of what is written is inconclusive and more speculative than evaluative. This

means that few articles pass judgment on the features of Second Life one way or

another, and instead leave

IV. Results of research

Throughout the vast majority of articles, books and blogs that discuss and critique Second Life, one dominant consensus gradually emerged: Using Second Life is very much a double-edged sword. For all its promise and potential, there exist just as many exciting developments and breakthroughs as there are disasters and frustrations.

By attempting to break down the uses and gratifications of Second Life by the different approaches to the program, it becomes apparent that each possible use has the potential – if not currently the ability – to deliver a corresponding and expected gratification for the consumer. Almost every publication made clear the fact that Second Life is at best the beginning of something big, and at worst a great idea in principle, but very few sources stated outright that Second Life delivered on its potential in full.

A. Social and personal identity gratification

In 2002, a year before its release, Second Life was covered by specialized gaming and culture publications as well as general news outlets. Each praised its potential for fun and interaction between peers, and very few had much to say beyond that. A February 2002 article in the *New York Times* made brief mention of a few potential ideas proposed by Linden Lab for the then-upcoming Second Life, such as a chessboard with movable pieces and a hockey rink.[18] Later that year, *Time* Magazine approached Second Life as a potential step up from conventional Internet-based

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[18] Markoff, John. "Into an Infinite Creation Story." *NYTimes.com* 14 Feb. 2002.
    http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9907EEDF173FF937A25751C0
    A9649C8B63

chatting and instant messaging thanks to the added personal touch of avatars.[19]

However, little was said about the long-term or ground-breaking applications for

Second Life at this point; with no hands-on experience, writers could not have predicted

the far-reaching potential of the program. Most of these articles only allude to Second

Life being used for light-duty gaming and conversational purposes, sort of like a

massive playground for people to take their virtual selves to mingle. Before its release,

the consensus was that Second Life was an interesting diversion that might be

interesting to more than just the average tech-savvy user, but little attention was paid to

any potential far-reaching gratifications.

In November of 2002, *Time* went so far as to name Second Life one of its Best

Inventions of 2002.[20] It promised grandiose dreams to its mainstream, national

audience: "Ever want to build a cathedral? Underwater? Change your clothes, your

face, your whole body? Fly? You can't do any of that stuff in real life, but you can do

it all and more in Second Life."[21] However, what was notably missing was any mention

of the steep learning curve, the requirement of a relatively high-performance computer,

or any more practical applications for the program. This is partially due to space

constraints and lack of hands-on experience with the program, but it is still indicative of

a general naïveté in the mainstream press regarding Second Life.

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[19] "Time Magazine: 2002 Best Inventions: 3-D online environment." *Time.com* 10
       Nov. 2002. http://www.time.com/time/2002/inventions/rob_environment.html

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*

However, even in more recent publications the merit of Second Life as a social tool has not been discounted – nor should it be. In a mid-2008 article, the *Register-Guard*'s Lewis Taylor chronicled his foray into Second Life as something similar to a weekend at a vacation house. He describes his first avatar encounter with a middle-aged Web designer, Lauren Remington, who took him on a virtual tour of an in-world yacht club. "Remington showed me around her manicured club, offering my avatar a Heineken, a meal, a glimpse at the media room and some ice skating. To take part in these activities, I didn't do much besides pointing and clicking my mouse. The avatar (and the software) did the rest."[22] This ease of use in Taylor's experience, coupled with his admitted lack of mastery over technology, suggests social gratifications are within reach of the average user without the same barriers to entry that existed in the program's earlier years. This is potentially due to several factors, such as the increasing performance of the average computer and the general knowledge the average person now has about computers and videogames.

Aphra Kerr, an Irish sociology professor at the National University of Ireland, has studied videogame player behavior and the benefits people seek from games. In an online setting – particularly in MMOGs, she suggests that social interaction plays a much larger role in many cases than the actual gameplay goals and framework:

"Empirical research studies suggest that networked play and MMOGs are

leading to the development of entirely new spaces and patterns of interactive

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[22] Taylor, Lewis. "Online alter ego." *Register-Guard* 5 May 2008.
   http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/dt.cms.support.viewStory.cls?cid=9
   7950&sid=41&fid=1

media practice. . . studies have found that people often spend as much, if not more, time socialsing as on quests. . . It appears that control, exploration, performance, sociability/community and, to a lesser extent, narrative are important component aspects of digital game play."[23]

While Second Life offers a free environment for people to meet up and socialize, it has also been criticized for the adverse effects that seeking those gratifications can have on its users. Creator Philip Rosedale argues it is a more subjective question:

> "Whether sitting in front of a computer is bad for you is a function of whether what you are doing there is more or less challenging than real life. If you are confronted with a complex human environment with people from all over the world . . . you could actually be better off in front of the computer. Second Life can teach people new skills and connect them with new cultures in a way that the real world-environments of many places cannot."[24]

In fact, Rosedale rejects assertions that Second Life could benefit from game-like goals, or that gameplay is even one of the most common uses of his program. Citing more

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[23] Kerr, Aphra. *The Business and Culture of Digital Games.* London: SAGE Publications, 2006, p. 152.

[24] Dubner, Stephen J. "Philip Rosedale Answers Your Second Life Questions." *Freakonomics* blog on *NYTimes.com* 13 Dec. 2008. http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/philip-rosedale-answers-your-second-life-questions

than 1 billion user-created objects in existence, Rosedale says "if anything, Second Life is more diverse than the real world in terms of types of activities, not less."[25]

While skepticism of such claims is made clear in most reports, the news hook of a better, bigger, newer world to explore is seen as a concept with mass appeal, based on the mainstream publications that run stories with similar quotes and concepts in them. It is generally accepted that a new social experience is a commonly sought gratification among most people.

B. Business and productivity gratification

It wasn't long before innovative businesspeople, marketers and tech-savvy salespeople began to explore the lucrative side of Second Life. Business-oriented publications like *Forbes*, *Fortune* and *BusinessWeek* all began talking about the potential of a virtual world for business. Before long, mainstream journalistic businesses, such as CNN and Reuters, established virtual newsrooms and assigned reporters a beat on the metaverse.

As companies are beginning to use Second Life as an alternative to videoconferencing or conference calling (for example, IBM adopted a virtual conference room where avatars would come together to hold corporate meetings), media coverage has picked up in recent years in the area of business-related gratification through Second Life.[26]

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[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Maney, Kevin. "The king of alter egos is surprisingly humble guy." *USA Today* 2 February 2007: 1B

Second Life's economy operates on a form of currency called the Linden dollar. The Linden dollar (sometimes just referred to as the Linden) is a unit of currency that operates in place of real-world money for the purposes of financial transactions in the world of Second Life. Just as any currency represents spending power in a market, the Linden dollar represents a user's limited license right to utilize various features within Second Life. Linden dollars can be acquired by exchanging real-world currencies for the virtual-world alternative – an exchange that is made on Linden Lab's official currency exchange, the Lindex.

John Zdanowski, chief financial officer of Linden Lab, says the Second Life economy serves an essential function for enabling the virtual world's inhabitants to trade and exchange property. [27] "The Lindex basically facilitates placing value on the Linden in-world currency," Zdanowski explains.[28] "There were a lot of other players doing it out there and we thought consolidating the volume in one place would reduce volatility and improve the tradability of the Linden."[29]

Reporters have shown that while the Second Life economy is the backbone of user-generated content distribution and exchange, it also operates as a fun experiment in economics. Zdanowski explains that when Linden chose to establish the Linden dollar as a floating currency – that is, a currency where the market establishes the prices – the

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[27] Wong, Grace. "How real money works in Second Life." *CNNMoney.com*, 8 Dec. 2006. Accessed 1 May 2008. http://money.cnn.com/2006/12/08/technology/sl_lindex/index.htm?section=mon ey_technology

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*

decision was made for two reasons: to accommodate a global user base and to keep with the spirit of adventurous experimentation that Second Life fosters.[30] "It creates more flexibility, it's more interesting – and more fun," Zdanowski adds.[31]

Some economics and business writers have suggested the Linden dollar offers a specialized perspective on how the virtual markets in Second Life operate in comparison to real-world markets, as well as how different currencies compare in exchange rates. A CNN article suggests the virtual market is particularly promising: while the US dollar has been consistently slipping among other currencies in recent years, the Linden dollar is facing a period of strengthening.[32] "The in-world economy has been growing so rapidly, faster than the money supply, so there's been constant pressure for the Linden to appreciate against the dollar," Zdanowski says, noting that Linden employs tactics to help control the economy.[33] While Linden Lab continuously monitors Second Life's economy, it is only capable of minimal control, such as imposing limits on individual trading limits based on how long a user has been active in Second Life.[34] This free, open economy in a virtual world has drawn the interest of the business- and economy-driven world, and its publications have taken heed.

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[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Wong, Grace. "How real money works in Second Life." *CNNMoney.com*, 8 Dec. 2006. Accessed 1 May 2008. http://money.cnn.com/2006/12/08/technology/sl_lindex/index.htm?section=money_technology

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

While the long-term results of major marketing campaigns in Second Life remain to be seen, many advertisements and public relations events have sprung up throughout virtual space. Many major retailers have utilized their real estate in Second Life as a virtual shopping center of sorts, often including links to websites to drive users to a sale; for example, Sony Ericsson has an island that operates as a mobile phone shop where avatars can check out three dimensional models of cell phones and jump right to the company's website to purchase one if desired.

An article from April 2008 in the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* discusses a class being offered in marketing for virtual worlds. This article describes the program in a positive light, noting that people are "ditching their real-world jobs for online positions within Second Life."[35]

Because using Second Life as a platform for marketing is still a relatively new idea, there exists the potential for a strong return on investment from unexpected channels. For example, W Hotels, a major hotel company, used Second Life as a place to show off a model of its new Aloft brand hotel to the public. While the company's primary goal was to give interested parties an opportunity to examine the hotel's new designs, the novelty of the marketing technique piqued the interest of numerous reporters.[36]

[35] Wallace, Daniel. "Second Life a tool for RIT business students." *Democrat and Chronicle* 26 April 2008.
http://www.democratandchronicle.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2008804260313

[36] Kirkpatrick, David. "No, Second Life is not overhyped." *CNNMoney.com* 10

However, in much of the feedback from campaigns such as these, much of the positive response has come not from the actual advertisement produced, but from the press coverage simply because of the novelty of the endeavor. As Second Life becomes more and more embedded in the mainstream, it is likely these marketing tactics will require more insight, ingenuity and community response in order to be picked up by the news media, which could in turn promote better marketing campaigns.[37]

Regardless, most media coverage has been optimistic about the role of Second Life-based industry. With relatively minor establishing costs (a few hundred dollars to purchase and pay rent on land) and a growing community, setting up shop in Second Life is becoming more accessible all the time – something many aspiring tech-lovers and entrepreneurs are taking notice of, along with business writers and reporters.

C. Educational and research gratification

In the United States, videogames are not typically seen as a medium demanding of study in the same context as newspapers, television, cinema or the Internet. In fact, the usefulness of videogames for learning and education has been debated both locally and internationally. South Korean culture denotes videogames as being a valuable part of its total media culture, and France offers financial incentives to game studios from the National Film Board.[38]

November 2006. Accessed 2 May 2008. http://money.cnn.com/2006/11/09/technology/fastforward_secondlife.fortune/index.htm

[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Kerr, Aphra. *The Business and Culture of Digital Games.* London: SAGE

Philip Rosedale thinks that interactive programs like Second Life can offer

valuable education experiences for its users, both as students and as teachers.[39]

Rosedale notes a "vibrant community" of educators currently involved in Second Life,

and says he is "happy to see it continuing to grow."[40] Many educational uses have been

found within Second Life, including distance learning, modeling, research, and

collaborative works.[41] Linden Lab also operates a program called Campus: Second

Life, where educators can obtain virtual land grants for a semester to try out teaching in

the metaverse.

These opportunities have caught the eye of such recognizable business

publications as Stephen J. Dubner's *Freakonomics* blog, hosted on the *New York Times'*

Web site, which is renowned for its unconventional and interesting stories on current

economics-related topics. Dubner's *Freakonomics* is considered to be a hip and

relevant resource for explaining unusual and innovative approaches to economics, and

its presence on the *New York Times'* Web site further cements Second Life's perception

in the media as an innovative, topical application and places it in an optimistic light.

Some educators find that avatars may provide the best venue for teaching

students. Jeremy Bailenson, a researcher at Stanford University, writes about an

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Publications, 2006, p. 153.

[39] Dubner, Stephen J. "Philip Rosedale Answers Your Second Life Questions."
Freakonomics blog on *NYTimes.com* 13 Dec. 2008.
http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/philip-rosedale-answers-
your-second-life-questions

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] *Ibid.*

experimental classroom project in progress at the Stanford University Virtual Human Interaction Lab. As Bailenson wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education:* "My virtual representation of me can outperform me as a teacher any day. It can pay unwavering attention to every student in a class of 100 or more; show my most spectacular actions while concealing any lapse, like losing my cool; and detect the slightest movement, hint of confusion, and improvement in performance of each student simultaneously."[42] Such strong praise for education in virtual worlds is impressive. Additionally, the fact that it is present in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – a highly regarded publication on trends and news in education – speaks volumes about the media's perception of the importance of virtual worlds to its readers, who are

According to education writers, the effectiveness of teaching with an advanced avatar in a system like Bailenson's is not something to scoff at. In a virtual classroom, the number of students present would be much less consequential than in a real lecture hall. Every student would have an ideal view of the lecturer and would be able to ask individualized questions and get one-on-one help while the lecturer continues to teach to the rest of the class. With cameras and sensors able to pick up facial expressions and render them in real-time on an avatar – and software to know which gestures and expressions to block, such as frustration or anger – avatars could in theory make the perfect teacher.[43] An avatar, he reasons, has powers that just don't exist in physical

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[42] Bailenson, Jeremy. "Why Digital Avatars Make the Best Teachers." *Chronicle of Higher Education* April 4, 2008 .

[43] *Ibid.*

space. However, the ability to control avatars with such precision in an environment that students could all simultaneously access simply does not exist yet.

However, writers are quick to note that even though technology is improving and the Second Life infrastructure progresses, the potential for effective in-world teaching persists, but does not yet exist.[44]

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[44] *Ibid.*

V. Discussion

Throughout the past seven years, media coverage has held a relatively consistent tone in regard to Second Life's success: Although imperfect, it is constantly growing and improving with every new user that joins up. This general optimism is expressed across the majority of articles written on the subject, including those that cater to readers seeking the various gratifications studied in this thesis.

Because the majority of what is written about Second Life focuses on what the future holds as well as what is currently present in the virtual world, the trend of writing about hypothetical future means of gratification through the medium has persisted ever since the first stories were published about the program in 2002. This means that much of the media's depiction of Second Life reflects the notion that whatever may be coming in the future is promising to a wide variety of people because of its potential to innovate and revolutionize how users achieve certain gratifications. While this is certainly newsworthy, it is less indicative of why current users utilize Second Life other than to develop these fledgling ideas and to bolster existing ones.

Because the gratifications that emerged from the research were relatively broad in scope, it follows that these gratifications were all addressed in both mainstream, mass-audience publications and outlets as well as more specialized sources. However, no one gratification appeared to receive more coverage than the others. While business-related magazines clearly didn't focus as much on the socializing or teaching values of Second Life, the program's strength comes from its ability to accomplish so many things for so many people within one environment; as a result, each gratification is inextricably bound to the others. Also because of this, it became clear that, based

particularly on personal accounts and opinion-based media content, it was not uncommon for users to begin using Second Life to satisfy one gratification and then find gratification in other unexpected areas. This theme of emerging value is present in nearly every piece of media coverage available on Second Life.

Despite these caveats, Second Life's media depictions proved to be a legitimate and relevant topic to explore with the Uses and Gratifications model. Several distinct gratification patterns emerged and shed some light on why one of the most difficult-to-access applications in new media is a burgeoning phenomenon economically, socially and academically. It is hoped that the research and analysis can be built off of in future studies of Second Life as a medium through which users seek particular gratifications.

VI. Conclusion

While it is too early to draw any significant conclusions about the viability or future of Second Life itself, it is clear from examining the media's depictions of Second Life over time that interest in the program is only growing as more users sign on and more innovative uses are discovered and refined.

In turn, this suggests that the effort involved in attaining desired gratifications from Second Life is disappearing over time, based on the media's coverage of developments in the virtual world. It also affirms that, as Second Life's user base continues to grow, more people are seeing it as the preferable means by which these pre-existing needs for gratification can be obtained, eschewing other channels like social networking sites and conventional entertainment venues.

Yet even in its relatively short lifetime, Second Life has evolved from mere rumor and speculation of great things to an environment that has proved itself capable of consistently improving upon itself through the efforts of its dedicated users. This consistent improvement from the dedicated first users has lowered the barriers to entry for more potential consumers. Just as many new media experience gradual adoption rates, such as cable television did in the 1970s, Second Life is being perceived as a more desirable means to gratification than ever before.

A note on the blog component

As I began research on Second Life with the hopes of developing a thesis on the subject, it quickly became apparent that the best way to understand Second Life was to

experience it hands-on. For six months, I chronicled my exploration of the virtual world in a blog entitled "Mass Communication in Second Life." This blog was intended to be a contribution to the collaborative infrastructure of users who comprise Second Life's ecosystem. By posting my findings and raising questions and criticisms, I was aiming to not only reflect on my research and establish my thought process; I was also hoping to serve as a guidepost for other Second Life users taking their first plunge into the metaverse. Finally, the blog allowed me to exercise colloquial, effective communication in a writing style derived from my experience writing in a magazine format. According to Moran, writing for multimedia should be concise, snappy and coherent, without dense sentence structure and intricate or difficult terminology.[45]

Unfortunately, the focus of this thesis changed abruptly late into its development and the blog component had to be removed entirely. Although it cannot be considered a component of this work, the blog offers vital insight into the inner workings of Second Life. If I had not explored Second Life and described my experiences, I would not have done an adequate job as a researcher, as a student, or as a reporter. This blog serves as an anchor for the entire project and establishes relevance between my journalistic studies and this work. In short, it is something I put an immense amount of work into and something I am proud of, and I encourage any interested reader to examine it online at http://slmasscom.blogspot.com/.

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[45] Moran, Barbara. *Crafting Multimedia Text: Websites and Presentations.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2005, p. 46.

Appendix: Works Cited and Consulted

This appendix is intended to be an authoritative and comprehensive list of all the sources used, explicitly or otherwise, throughout the course of this thesis. All of the works cited in footnotes in the essay portion of my thesis appear again in the following pages, along with a brief annotation explaining the source's background and relevance to my study. Additional sources that were useful in some way are also listed in the following pages.

All hyperlinks are functional as of May 16, 2008.

Works Cited and Consulted

Bailenson, Jeremy. "Why Digital Avatars Make the Best Teachers." *Chronicle of Higher Education* April 4, 2008.

Bailenson, a communications assistant professor at Stanford University, argues that as digital avatar technology improves, teaching in virtual worlds will offer more benefits and fewer pitfalls than real-world classrooms; at the very least, they are a marked improvement over previous attempts at distance learning.

Blood, Rebecca. *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002.

When I first began blogging in 2002, I wish I'd had this book at my side. Blood does an exceptional job of explaining the basic expectations, requirements, and benefits of blogging – in plain English.

Blumler, Jay G. and Katz, Elihu. *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research.* Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1974.

This is one of the first major publications on the Uses and Gratifications model of media research. Authors Blumler and Elihu are often credited with having laid the groundwork for the study.

Dubner, Stephen J. "Philip Rosedale Answers Your Second Life Questions." *Freakonomics* blog on *NYTimes.com* 13 Dec. 2008. http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/philip-rosedale-answers-your-second-life-questions/

This source sheds some light on Second Life creator Philip Rosedale's ambitions and reactions to Second Life's community. It is an excellent piece in illustrating Linden Lab's point of view on the Second Life project.

"EVE Online." http://www.eve-online.com/

The official website of EVE Online, a massively multiplayer online game centered around player-controlled spaceships that engage in combat, conquest and trading. The website has a wealth of details on its player community as well as a solid explanation of persistent-world environments.

"Free Jeff Gerstmann!" *GamePolitics* 30 Nov. 2007.
http://www.gamepolitics.com/2007/11/30/free-jeff-gerstmann

This article was posted on GamePolitics, a website that examines political matters in the videogame industry.

Hall, Kenji. "More Delays for PlayStation Home." *BusinessWeek.com* 22 April 2008.
http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/apr2008/gb20080422_706621.
htm?campaign_id=rss_daily

This article discusses the many delays Sony has faced in launching its virtual online world, "Home." "Home" is seen by many as an attempt to bring the social interaction and avatar customization popularized by Second Life to a mainstream commercial audience through Sony's PlayStation 3 console.

Hill, Michael. "Researchers teach 'Second Life' avatar to think." *Associated Press* 18 May 2008. http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jZy-cAS6fmqoTCIH9TXL8JHu6frAD90O7EDG0

This article discusses a tech team working to create an artificial intelligence that exists inside the virtual world of Second Life. An interesting article that examines potential future uses for virtual worlds like Second Life.

Jana, Reena and McConnon, Aili. "Second Life Lessons." *Business Week* issue 4011, special section p. 17-25. 11/27/2006.

This article provides a great explanation of the challenges and benefits of communicating through Second Life. It also includes a thorough list of different major firms and organizations that have set up virtual shop in Second Life.

Kerr, Aphra. *The Business and Culture of Digital Games*. London: SAGE Publications, 2006.

Aphra Kerr's academic book is a primer on the videogame industry, videogame players, design and business principles, etc. Many of these concepts apply to a virtual world program like Second Life.

Kirkpatrick, David. "No, Second Life is not overhyped." *CNNMoney.com* 10 Nov. 2006.
http://money.cnn.com/2006/11/09/technology/fastforward_secondlife.fortune/index.htm

Kirkpatrick discusses how Second Life is more than just a myth – it's actually making a difference from a marketing perspective, and it's pushing interactivity on the Internet forward.

Knutson, Ryan. "A whole new reality." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 9 Nov. 2007.
http://media.www.dailyemerald.com/media/storage/paper859/news/2007/11/09/News/A.Whole.New.Reality-3091457.shtml

Knutson examines Second Life from both a broad perspective and from the University of Oregon's point of view by discussing on-campus programs that utilize Second Life.

Maney, Kevin. "The king of alter egos is surprisingly humble guy." *USA Today* 2 February 2007: 1B.

Kevin Maney is a technology writer for USA Today, and his writing manages to make the most impenetrable of high-tech stories digestible for a regular audience. This article is no exception, and it gives some background on the creator of Second Life and the inspiration behind it.

Markoff, John. "Into an Infinite Creation Story." *NYTimes.com* 14 Feb. 2002.
http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9907EEDF173FF937A25751C0A9649C8B63

This piece is one of the first preliminary stories on Second Life, then in development under the name "LindenWorld." It is interesting to note the author's comparative lack of depth in exploring Second Life's potential; nothing specific is said about its potential applications.

Massively. Weblog. http://www.massively.com

Massively is a blog that actively follows trends and news in the realm of MMO (massively multiplayer online) games. While Second Life is not technically a game, it is covered as well by Massively.

Moran, Barbara. *Crafting Multimedia Text: Websites and Presentations.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2005.

> *This text provides a great set of guidelines for writing for multimedia, and was very useful in crafting the blog for this thesis.*

Official Second Life Blog, The. Weblog. http://blog.secondlife.com

> *Updated many times a day, the official blog of Second Life contains general information from the developers on new features, known problems, upcoming events and tips on how to get more out of Second Life.*

> - *Regarding inventory loss*: http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/04/14/update-experiencing-inventory-loss-read-on/

Ruggiero, Thomas E. "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century." *Mass Communication & Society* Winter 2000, Vol. 3 no. 1, p. 3-37.

> *Ruggiero argues against critics of uses and gratifications theory, insisting that it is a substantive and legitimate theory in studying social science. This was a useful source for framing my research on this thesis.*

Schiesel, Seth. "A Universe Where Ideas Can Trump Actions." *NYTimes.com*, 27 April 2000. http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/00/04/circuits/articles/27game.html

> *This is an early review of Planescape: Torment, a game renowned for its extensive and well-crafted story. It is written by Seth Schiesel, who continues to write about videogames for the* New York Times.

Second Life official website. http://www.secondlife.com/

> *Second Life's official website is rife with useful, up-to-date information and interesting statistics. A very useful backgrounder.*

Second Life Herald, The. Weblog. http://www.secondlifeherald.com/

> *This weblog was founded by Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor interested in how social issues present themselves in virtual worlds. The blog is widely read*

and features all sorts of stories on Second Life, including instances of crime and money issues, as well as pointing out some of the more absurd elements of the virtual world.

"SLPN – Podcasts for the Metaverse." http://www.slpodcast.net/

This site is a resource for finding a variety of podcasts centered around Second Life.

Stafford, Thomas F. and Schkade, Lawrence L. "Determining Uses and Gratifications for the Internet." *Decision Sciences* Spring 2004, Vol. 35 no. 2, p. 259-80.

This piece was useful for establishing a framework to do my research by. It argues that previous research was insufficient into uses and gratifications of Internet use, and it suggests that in addition to process and content gratifications, a third gratification – social – has been understated. That third gratification in particular is central to Second Life's purpose.

Taylor, Lewis. "Online alter ego." *Register-Guard* 5 May 2008.
http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/dt.cms.support.viewStory.cls?cid=97950&sid=41&fid=1

Local arts writer Lewis Taylor tackles the online world of Second Life and chronicles his experiences as a passive user. This article gave some insight into the uses and gratifications for a general audience user – the kind of person who goes online to socialize, not to do business.

"Technorati: About Us." http://www.technorati.com/about/

This page explains how Technorati operates as a blog tracking and indexing site, and gives statistics on the number of blogs on the Internet.

Tech Live staff. "A Story of Virtual Creation." *TechTV.com* 19 Feb. 2002.
http://www.g4techtv.com/techtvvault/features/36196/A_Story_of_Virtual_Creation.html

This is another example of the media's first look at Second Life; however, this was written by the TechTV staff, which has now merged with G4. It was one of the first articles written for a tech-savvy audience.

"Time Magazine: 2002 Best Inventions: 3-D online environment." *Time.com* 10 Nov. 2002. http://www.time.com/time/2002/inventions/rob_environment.html

>   Time *named Second Life one of its best inventions of 2002, even though Second Life didn't debut until the summer of 2003. For a mainstream publication like* Time *to feature something as obscure as Second Life is unusual, and indicative of the fact that there may be an inherent mainstream appeal behind its clandestine digital doors.*

Thomas, David; Orland, Kyle; and Steinberg, Scott. *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual.* 2007. Ebook obtained from http://www.gamestyleguide.com/

>   *Written by three diverse veterans of the videogame journalism industry, the* Videogame Style Guide *strives to establish a common ground for discussing videogames in a journalistic setting. It is the reason*

Wallace, Daniel. "Second Life a tool for RIT business students." *Democrat and Chronicle* 26 April 2008. http://www.democratandchronicle.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=20088042603 13

>   *This article discusses the Rochester Institute of Technology's use of Second Life in its business program. It is a prime example of learning to market in virtual worlds, and how those skills are being taught in higher education now.*

Wong, Grace. "How real money works in Second Life." *CNNMoney.com* 8 Dec. 2006. http://money.cnn.com/2006/12/08/technology/sl_lindex/index.htm?section=mon ey_technology

>   *Written for a reader with a strong background in economics, this article details how markets fluctuate, how the conversion between real world money and Second Life money is controlled, and what lessons the virtual market can teach economists.*

"World Internet Usage Statistics." *Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics.* http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

>   *This website is owned and operated by Miniwatts Marketing Group, an Internet market research company.*

"World of Warcraft reaches new milestone: 10 million subscribers." 22 Jan. 2008. http://blizzard.com/us/press/080122.html

This is a press release published in late January of 2008 that announces, among other things, that World of Warcraft surpassed a simultaneous userbase of 10 million paying subscribers. This is indicative of long-term growth in the game, as it was released in 2004 but subscription numbers continue to climb.

Zimmer, Linda. *Business Communicators of Second Life.* Weblog. http://freshtakes.typepad.com/sl_communicators/

This blog is written by Linda Zimmer, a communications media professional with extensive background in new media. Her blog is an invaluable resource for understanding the business side of Second Life.