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Virtual Worlds, Collaboratively Built

Philip Rosedale, Linden Lab

Keywords: virtual worlds; Second Life; standards; Open Source.

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Virtual Worlds, Collaboratively Built

Philip Rosedale, Linden Lab

Even before they really existed, I deeply believed that virtual worlds would have a profound impact on the real world, ultimately affecting the lives of people worldwide, in much the same way that the World Wide Web itself has brought about a dramatic transformation in how we communicate. Now that Second Life—and more broadly, virtual worlds—have become at least "worthy of criticism," I am all the more convinced that this will prove to be true. We will soon see virtual worlds expand from millions of active users to billions.

So what is the best way to proceed as a company that is leading this initial growth? Should we be more open or more closed in our efforts? This is a complicated question when applied to a complex system like Second Life, with its many different interfaces, software modules, and potential areas for standardization. But the overall scale and impact of the virtual world suggests at a high level that the best outcome is to be very open, with respect both to software code and the numerous standards that connect it. Its similarity to the web is undeniable, and the web was built on open standards by a large number of different people, companies, and countries. The same will likely be true here.

Undertakings of this scope are dangerously hampered by attempts to make them restricted, proprietary, or opaque. Like the web, we are all going to need to rely increasingly on virtual worlds being stable, reliable, and safe. As virtual worlds carry more and more economic and creative value, and affect the lives of more people, they will need to be inspected and improved by everyone using them. We should not trust a single company or organization to control them, any more than with the web. With open platforms, even the threat of competitive risk or arbitrary judgment from a controlling provider can hamper the creative energy of developers. A good example of this effect is modern smart-phones like the iPhone, Blackberry or G1 in comparison to earlier network-provider dominated cellphone applications. Like the web, virtual world companies will be most successful by providing only the minimal scaffolding for the development of the rich content experiences that will bring more and more usage.

Additionally, Second Life has already been a benefit to people's lives, suggesting more generally that Virtual Worlds can become a common human resource and a force for good. In Second Life we have seen people unable to walk in real life uplifted and empowered by their ability to walk and even fly in the virtual world. There are thousands of people making incomes in Second Life that in many cases would be unavailable to those same people in real life. In Second Life you can get a tour of a Japanese garden from the Japanese person who created it, complete with on-the-fly translation to help you communicate. So if Second Life and virtual worlds are of general benefit and utility to humanity, we have a responsibility to make them available as broadly as possible and as quickly as we can. I believe that the way to do this most effectively is to use open standards and an open development process.

The historical development of Second Life was also dependent on standards and openness. When we set out to build Second Life, we also didn't intend to re-create everything anew. Instead, the team at Linden Lab drew upon countless examples of prior work in games and virtual worlds and focused innovation on policy—the platform and the tools that mattered most to our community. Along the way, Linden Lab made use of countless standards, leveraging existing technology. The decision to be very open from the start was risky but paid off; many more closed and secretive competitors to Second Life failed to survive. Being open also eliminates the friction of moving information in and out of the virtual world. The complexity and uncertainty of virtual worlds favored a process where features were developed more in the open and early feedback was able to direct development. We simply didn't feel smart enough to be able to hide our ideas from end-users!

Like the web, though even more so, virtual worlds rely on the interconnectedness of many different components to achieve an immersive, compelling experience. Wherever feasible, our path has been to open the avenues for others to develop and explore these components. The result has been explosive growth and development both within the Virtual World, and in the technology that enables it. The creation of Second Life has been truly a collaborative experience, and couldn't have evolved any other way. One major avenue of collaboration is open source: we use, contribute, and have even spun off open source projects for all aspects of Virtual Worlds. We have open sourced our viewer, creating a whole ecosystem around that functionality. Last summer we ran a great experiment in collaboration between Second Life and OpenSim. And we have always involved the Residents of Second Life in a deep and continuing discussion of how the technology and world need to evolve to meet their needs.

I feel that virtual worlds, as a whole, are a paradigm that will best be developed if researchers and developers of this technology are able to work together in increasing numbers and ways. Going forward, we will continue to expand the collaborative methods we've used in the past, and take the first steps towards establishing base standards essential to further exploration and development. I believe that building on each other's work through open research and open source and open standards, is the only way for Virtual Worlds to reach their full potential. I invite you to come build with us.