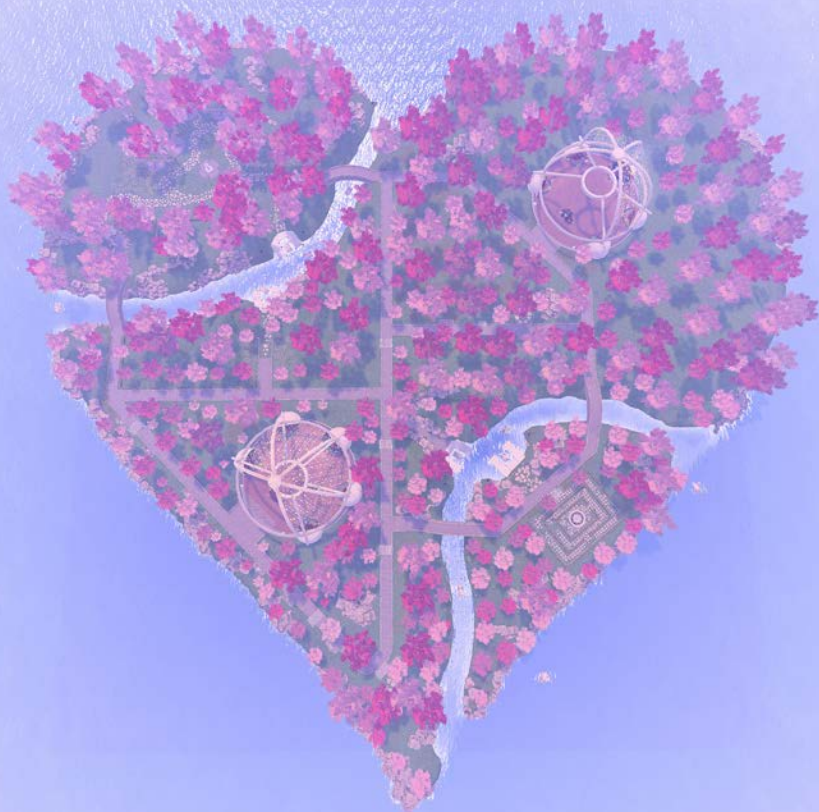


IMAGINE the POSSIBILITIES



How a College Course in Second Life
Taught Me Everything I Needed to Know
About the Metaverse

By Noah Hertz



Much of the bluster surrounding the metaverse is a load of hoey. From articles fawning over weddings in the metaverse to declarations that it will change the very structure of the internet as we interact with it, I can't help but feel like we've been here before.

And frankly, that's because we have.

Remember *Second Life*? Developed by Linden Lab and first unleashed on the world in 2003, *Second Life* was once a ubiquitous shorthand for weird shit computer nerds enjoy. From documentaries examining the lives of players to a reference on *The Office*, to news stories about players getting married in the game – and other games, like *World of Warcraft* – this proto-metaverse was everywhere.

When I hear excitement over the supposedly revolutionary changes the metaverse will bring to the internet and our lives, I can't help but sigh, because I got a taste of it myself.

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In 2016, I was a college freshman determined to burn through my required general education classes as fast as possible. These basic courses, like entry-level science and math, were standing between me and the more interesting history and politics classes I was in college to take. I worked hard to maximize the number of credits each class got me, often taking classes that satisfied multiple requirements so I could get to the good stuff.

So, when an advisor told me I could knock out my required lab science and computer competency credit in one course, I jumped at the opportunity.

"Have you ever heard of *Second Life*?" she asked me.

I laughed. Of course, I had heard of *Second Life*. I had grown up hearing about people buying expensive homes, not on multi-acre lots, but on *Second Life* servers. Once a week, she explained, I would log onto a *Second Life* server, participate in a chemistry lab, do some "activities," a brief quiz and *boom*, I could go take that Political Philosophy course I'd been eyeing.

I dropped \$150 to get access to a specialized *Second Life* server operated by the company CNDG which specializes in building academic spaces in the virtual world. By taking advantage of the immersive world – not to sell real estate or hold board meetings – students less interested in STEM, like myself, could get some hands-on learning. The class, a chemistry course with a CSI flavor, was centered around solving a murder mystery based on a real murder that happened not far from my university. What followed was a semester that taught me absolutely nothing – not even the meta-verse – can replace real human interaction. Here are some of the highlights.

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The course began with a tutorial on an island separated from the rest of our *Second Life* world. A representative from CNDG presided over me and a bunch of default-avatar students stum-

bling around, learning the controls. We learned to walk, chat with one another and open a dated-looking in-game PDA where we would take quizzes. Oh yeah, we could fly, too, but that wasn't a focus of the course.

We were encouraged to customize our avatars so we would connect more with our *Second Life* representation of ourselves. Scrolling through my options for decking out my character, I started to see pre-set options like “vampire” and “werewolf.”

In the chat window I asked the representative, “I see that there are non-human options for character creation. Can I be a werewolf?”

“Hi Noah!” they responded. “Some professors have a ‘humans only’ rule in their classrooms and labs.” In hindsight, maybe I should have asked my professor if my class did.

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Before I could take the quiz that marked the end of the day's lesson and stop using *Second Life* for the week, the course dictated I participate in a number of in-world activities. To CNDG's credit, the world they built was not just a default *Second Life* portal, but a unique area where I could wander from the lab to other areas.

One such area was the movie theater where I was supposed to go watch a lab safety video. The day's quiz would be centered around the contents of the video. I entered the movie theater and took a digital seat in front of a screen with a cleverly embedded YouTube video.

I clicked the play button and was met with an error.

Because of the quiz the info in the video was essential to me, so I was forced to open the video outside of *Second Life*, watch it in my web browser and go back

to *Second Life* to take the quiz on the video's contents. Bouncing from window to window, breaking the immersion of my *Second Life* class, I returned and took the quiz. I learned to not inhale chemicals directly and to always wear goggles in the lab.

* * *

Some lessons took place, at least partially, in a virtual laboratory, designed in *Second Life* to look like a real crime scene investigation lab.

One particular lesson required that I put some virtual item into a virtual centrifuge for some virtual reason. When I walked into the lab, though, I noticed a problem – my virtual character's virtual clothes had disappeared.

No, I hadn't done it on purpose. It would have been funny, sure, but I didn't

do it. My *Second Life* character doll was Ken-doll smooth and hardly fit for a classroom that required me to put on a virtual lab coat and goggles before beginning the day's experiment.

"I'm not doing this on purpose, I promise," I quickly messaged to our *Second Life* lab assistant.

"Try resetting your character's model," they responded.

I entered the character creator and switched to "White Guy #4." This character model was different than "White Guy #2," which I had selected at my initial character creation. This created another issue. "White Guy #4" came pre-costumed in a tuxedo, arguably worse attire for a lab than my birthday suit.

I walked my character over to the supply closet and donned my goggles and lab coat over my default tuxedo and began the chemistry lesson.

* * *

I never did particularly well on my weekly *Second Life* quizzes. While CNDG boasts a sizable increase in the number of students enrolling in basic chemistry courses at my university thanks to the digital offering, I found it hard to learn things in the environment. Maybe it was the janky tech of *Second Life*, or my shitty laptop which struggled to load even *Second Life*'s crappy graphics, but I rarely found myself as engrossed as I may be in a face-to-face setting.

Thankfully, we were given two tries at each week's quiz. The highest grade would be the one that stuck with you.

One particular day I logged on to take my quiz, standing in the main hub area with a bunch of other students as our character stared at our PDAs trying to pass the damn course. I scored pretty poorly on that day's quiz, so I took my second try and did even worse. It was frustrating - I'd spent an extra \$150 to take this course so I could knock out



some classes I already didn't want to take, and here I was actively hurting my GPA putzing around like a schmuck in a game that hadn't been popular in a decade.

There was one benefit to *Second Life*, though. After failing my quiz, I toggled the flying option and took off into the virtual sky like Neo at the end of *The Matrix*. You can't do that after failing an IRL quiz.

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I finished the course and muddled my way through solving the murder mystery. I never met my professor in-person and I ended the course with a B-minus, my lowest of the semester and one of the lowest grades I scored in all of my college classes.

* * *

I never made any friends in the course; I never even spoke to anyone else the whole semester. In a normal college course, conversation is natural. Whether it's a, "Get a load of this guy" at an annoying peer or setting up a study group to take on a tough exam, conversation is natural even in the worst college courses because small talk doesn't require an incentive for most. But in *Second Life*, talking to anyone was a clunky experience when so many people were running – or flying – to speed through their assignment as quick as possible.

There was no incentive to chat. There was no real incentive to do anything oth-

er than speed through my assignment so I could get back to my real life. I couldn't tell you the name of a single other person who took that course with me that semester. The roster seemed to have been filled with students like myself – bored students rushing through assignments so they could get off *Second Life* and get back to talking to real people.

* * *

Second Life's star has since faded – more like exploded and died, really. What does that mean for the Metaverse? I don't know, personally, but I know my experience with *Second Life* was rocky and strange. Every interaction felt clunky, every conversation weirdly stilted and, I can only really speak for myself here, I definitely did worse on a metaverse college course than I would have in an in-person class.

If business meetings in the Metaverse are going to look anything like my college chemistry course, I think I'll stick with the real world. It may not be as glamorous and I may not be able to bring my NFTs to work – or whatever the hell the Metaverse is claiming I'll be able to do this week – but at least I won't show up to work naked. 🍑

