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*Making virtual worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life.*  
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Many avid Second Life (SL) residents have an unusual parasocial relationship with the employees of Linden Lab (LL), the creators of the Second Life world. With their distinct last names (all employees have Linden for their avatar name) Lindens walk among the grid like gods in the machine. Their exclusive employee-only SL client even has a “God Mode” that affords them a set of tools that average residents cannot access. The love/hate relationship that the population of SL has with the Lindens is evidenced in blogs, machinima, in-world protests and fan clubs and many other forms of expression. Residents who are deemed to be in particular favor of the Lindens have even been accused of being part of secret privileged organizations (referred to as the “Fetid Inner Core”) in which users are given preferential treatment from the Lindens.

With this level of fascination with Linden Lab employees on behalf of SL’s avid user base it would be easy to see Thomas Malaby’s book, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (2009), as a sort of fan fiction masquerading as ethnography but this is not the case. Malaby’s time spent at LL studying the way the company works to create, govern, and nurture the world they have created offers original insight not only into the makings of this particular virtual world but into the responsibilities of all companies and organizations who create and support communities, especially prosumer (consumer plus producer) communities. In an economy shifting more toward services and information than products, this insight is highly useful. Situated among books such as Tom Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), Mark Stephen Meadow’s *I, Avatar* (2008) and Wagner James Au’s *The Making of Second Life* (2008), Malaby’s work offers a view of the internal struggles of a company whose business is reliant on its users’ creativity. Rather than focusing on the activities of residents within the world, the economy of the world, or a personal reflection of the SL experience, Malaby stands in the space...

**Book Review**

Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life

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between LL’s philosophies and the realities of those ideas as expressed in their creation.

Malaby’s time at LL allowed him to explore the way the company’s culture shapes and is shaped by the culture of the Second Life world. From the dreams of SL’s founding father, Philip Rosedale, to the day-to-day processes of LL employees, Malaby exposes the sometimes naive and utopian intentions that often clash with the actions of the SL residents. While the author concedes that “SL depends on unanticipated uses by its consumers” (p. 8), he also points out that the same behavior often required LL to make changes to its business to facilitate the needs and wants of its user base. The author also notes that LL’s culture of self-driven, self-defined goals and work processes were mirrored in the prosumer philosophy of the SL world. But, as time and growth changed the landscape, LL’s philosophy conflicted with the complications of scale and feasibility. By focusing on the internal processes of LL Malaby diverges from the mass of virtual worlds’ research, which focuses on the activities within a virtual world, and instead focuses on how the world is created. The politics and procedures of nurturing governance when balanced with customer service and responsiveness become the focus of Malaby’s work.

Making Virtual Worlds draws important parallels between the shifts in technology within and without SL and their influence on the world of LL’s operations. As SL expanded so did LL with all the same growing pains. Malaby illustrates how the simple process of dissemination of progress reports within LL changed as SL grew and brought along with it the complications of efficient communication which is mirrored in the increasing difficulty that LL had in communicating with its own users in efficient ways.

The seemingly constant tug-of-war between LL’s efforts to facilitate and allow creativity and its necessary reactions to the expression of creativity among its users is illustrated clearly in Malaby’s study. He gives insightful sneak peeks behind the scenes of LL not in a voyeuristic way but as a detached researcher observing the lab as a culture deep in the difficulties of creating another culture. Malaby points out that even the logo of LL is an important indicator of this tension. LL presented Malaby with a pendant necklace of the company’s eye-in-hand logo along with a card encouraging the recipient to join in and be the creative hand and watchful eye. What Malaby’s analysis illustrates is the very dichotomy present in the logo. Who’s hand? Who’s eye? In the author’s analysis, LL seems to be in a constant struggle to answer those questions not only among itself and its users but among its management and its employees.

From a broader view, Malaby’s work surfaces critical implications for anyone who is in a position to create and govern a community while simultaneously respecting the emerging culture and products of that community. Making Virtual Worlds offers an example of how one organization attempts to balance these responsibilities in a way that should be relevant to a wide range of readers from the classroom instructor to the software executive. As instructors we may have specific learning goals for a course but we know that simply telling students what we expect them to learn is highly ineffective. Rather, our responsibility is to create a space in which they can discover those goals on their own terms which often requires us to be flexible and reactive while being respectful and mindful of the larger process. The tensions at LL may be on a different scale but the lessons are still highly applicable.

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Sarah "Intellagirl" Smith-Robbins is a PhD Candidate at Ball State University where she has been teaching using Second Life since 2005. Her research focuses on the communication mechanics of virtual worlds and how those mechanics contribute to the social and learning aspects of these worlds. Her dissertation will be a study of 75 different virtual worlds. Sarah is also the coauthor of Second Life for Dummies and a consultant to higher education institutions around the United States and the globe. Her research has been featured in The New York Times, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and Educause Review. Sarah currently serves as the Senior Director of Emerging Technologies at the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University.