

# Second Life Lawspot: Creating a Law Library in a Virtual World

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Virtual reality: the phrase conjures up scenes out of science fiction, from the holodeck of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to the big-budget special effects of *The Matrix*. So what does virtual reality have to do with the law library?

"Second Life" takes one small step toward virtual reality. Second Life is a computer-generated 3-D world, created by Linden Lab. As in multi-user games such as "World of Warcraft," users log into a shared world in which they can meet and converse with thousands of others from around the world. But instead of performing pre-scripted quests and fighting pixelated dragons, participants create their own buildings, clubs, and businesses. They host their own entertainment and events, ranging from intellectual (universities experimenting with classes in Second Life) to practical (businesses using Second Life as a low-cost form of 3-D teleconferencing) to fun (participants creating their own games and parties) to salacious ("adult" businesses and clubs catering to virtually any taste). Participants buy and sell virtual land, merchandise and currency (the exchange rate floats at about 265 "Lindens" to the dollar), and hire each other's services. There are even law firms - and libraries. The SL Lawspot is my project, a "public law library" in Second Life.

The Lawspot is part of "SL Library 2.0," a project led by the Alliance Library System of Illinois. Volunteers from dozens of libraries, universities and educational groups participate in the project, which is situated on a string of virtual islands informally known as Information Archipelago. The project's purpose is to explore ways to use 3-D virtual worlds to provide library services, and its premise is that such worlds will play a large role in communications in the future. Inventor, futurist and author Ray Kurzweil recently noted, "We'll be spending quite a bit of our time in virtual-reality environments. Environments like Second Life are really a crude harbinger of what is to come.... Second Life already has a real economy, and people do real business transactions and have real romance." (<http://blogs.computerworld.com/node/6536>, November 13, 2007)

Business transactions and romance inevitably lead to disputes. A number of lawyers (or purported lawyers - Second Life's anonymity makes identification challenging) advertise their services in Second Life. The SL Lawspot serves these lawyers as well as the general Second Life public.

The Lawspot's collection is divided into two main areas. One portion of the collection presents general legal information, such as links to primary sources on the Web. The second deals with "virtual law." This nebulous term covers both the practice of law via the Internet (including virtual worlds), and legal issues peculiar to virtual worlds themselves.

Second Life is a testing ground for virtual world law. The Terms of Service expressly grant participants the "right to retain full intellectual property protection for the digital content they create in Second Life." ([http://secondlife.com/whatis/ip\\_rights.php](http://secondlife.com/whatis/ip_rights.php)) Linden Lab also "sells" virtual land ("Own Virtual Land...Become a part of history by purchasing land and developing your own piece of Second Life" (<http://secondlife.com/whatis/land.php>)). These policies give participants an economic and legal stake in the world. Conflicts can arise between content-creating users and other users, between Linden Lab and users, and between out-of-world IP owners and users (copyright and trademark infringement of well-known brands is widespread). In addition, until recently, Linden Lab placed very few restraints on content, resulting in a world largely free of regulations and zoning, in which a virtual sex club or casino could operate freely, even in residential or educational regions.

In the past year, these issues have begun to appear in the news and have spawned several lawsuits and government investigations. Second Life has experienced runs on banks allegedly operating Ponzi schemes; an alleged scam in which the same plot of virtual land was sold to four different people; two real-world lawsuits between participants over IP rights to their respective creations; and a real-world lawsuit against Linden Lab by a "land baron" who was banned after he allegedly abused a flaw in the computer system to buy land for one Linden.

The UK's SkyNews recently ran an exposé on alleged child pornography in Second Life, and investigations of "immoral" content have reportedly been conducted in France, Germany and Belgium. There is serious talk of real-world governments taxing virtual-world income, and Linden Lab, after tolerating gambling without comment for years, recently banned games of chance, supposedly under pressure from credit card companies worried about liability under 2006's Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act. (For more information on these and other issues, visit the Lawspot in Second Life or on the web at [www.lawspotonline.com](http://www.lawspotonline.com).)

Kurzweil's observation that Second Life is a crude harbinger rings true -- as long as the emphasis is placed on "crude." Second Life runs slowly on all but the most robust computers; network downtime is unpredictable and all too common. Moreover, the learning curve for new users is steep; the user interface is complex and non-intuitive, and documentation is uneven and difficult to locate. The tools for creating items and communicating are extensive but difficult to master. In addition, one of Second Life's great strengths - the ability for any participant to create items, buildings, and events - is also a weakness: since Linden Lab provides virtually no structured activity, new users often have difficulty knowing where to go and what to do.

But Second Life is, after all, only a harbinger. A number of companies are developing virtual worlds, including such major names as Disney, Cisco, IBM, and Viacom. Future worlds will surely find solutions for these problems. Whether they will offer the ability and incentive to create, or the unstructured freedom of Second Life, is another matter. The future of the future is unclear, but it will be fascinating to watch it unfold.

*This spring, the AALL/BNA Continuing Education Grants Program is sponsoring a self-paced workshop on law librarianship in Second Life. Contact Kate at [kfitz@saclaw.org](mailto:kfitz@saclaw.org) for more information.*

For more information about the career of law librarianship, go to <http://www.nocall.org> or <http://www.aallnet.org>