

Exploring a Second Life

by Jim Elfline

In the Internet-based virtual world of Second Life (**secondlife.com**), people explore options they may not have in real life. You can be a different gender, a different race, an entirely different “you” through an **avatar**—a virtual persona that you create. And, attractive to anyone with mobility issues, not only can avatars walk, they can fly and even teleport to different locations for virtual activities like shopping, parties, movies, and games.

For some people with MS, Second Life is also a community. “If I didn’t have Second Life, I would probably be staring at the wall or at the TV,” said Kat Klata,* the co-founder of a Second Life support group for people with MS and their caregivers that’s now over 100 strong. “Here I’ve developed close friendships and I feel like I’m connecting to the world.”

How to live your second life

Basic membership in Second Life is free. However, that doesn’t mean there isn’t real money to be made—and to spend. Because residents of Second Life retain intellectual property rights to their creations, they can buy, sell and trade them using “Linden Dollars,” which are purchased with U.S. dollars. These creations can include anything from avatar fashions to flying machines. Land



in Second Life also costs real money—if you want to build a virtual home, you are charged land-use fees on top of whatever membership level you have chosen above the basic free level.

To join Second Life, you need to download software to your computer, which must meet minimum system requirements (2000, XP, or Vista for PCs; Mac OS X 10.3.9 for Apple). A high-speed connection is a must. Once you download and run the software, it will guide you through how to join Second Life. You will visit tutorials on how to walk, search, and communicate with other residents. Residents can use voice chat to talk with others if they have a microphone on their computer.

Real information in a virtual world

To hook up with the MS community on Second Life, type “MS Society” in the search box. The first thing to come up will be the **MS Pavilion**. Built by the Illusion Factory in Los Angeles, it is a hub of information about MS and links back to the Soci-

ety’s own Web page. Recently, over 1,000 avatars visited the **Moving Forward Film Festival** at the pavilion.

Another destination is **MS Island VUMC**, built by the VU Medical Center and MS Center in Amsterdam. The island links to organizations such as the MS Research Foundation in the Netherlands, the Dutch MS Society, and the Multiple Sclerosis International Federation.

Launched in 2003, Second Life is now one of the most popular social networks on the Web...with some special features for people with MS.

A safe space

As in real life, the people make the place. Second Life has community standards that eschew any form of intolerance, harassment, or disclosure, creating what is for many a safe space. “You can talk to others who know what you are going through,” said Maladrina Reymont, a member of Klata’s group. After her first MS attack in 2005, she was off work for over three months. “I couldn’t even walk to the end of my street, but Second Life brought the world to my door.”

* Names in this article are avatar names

Jim Elfline is vice president of Operations for the Society’s Southern California Chapter and a Second Life community member.