


A second shot at life

By Christy Nicholson

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Over the last two years, a 29-year-old designer named Munchflower Zaius has rocketed to the top of the fashion world, reaching iconic status.

Self-taught and ambitious, she became so popular in her first year of designing that she stopped going out in public for fear of getting overwhelmed by fans. She created new looks for the likes of the singer Suzanne Vega, the author Kurt Vonnegut and Sen. John Edwards. She is a designer to the stars.

But Munchflower Zaius is not a real person, nor are her fans real people. She is a digital representation, or avatar, of a real person inside the popular online game "Second Life" (secondlife.com).

Some describe "Second Life" as "The Matrix" meets MySpace, the online networking site. It's the latest addition to the world of multiplayer online games. In January, the game had nearly 100,000 users, and Linden Lab, the San Francisco company that created it in 2003, predicts there will be more than a million by the end of the year.

"Second Life" mimics real life in nearly every way. Users meet other people, throw parties, attend church, even open stores where they sell virtual goods. The possibilities are endless.

In real life Munchflower Zaius is Shannon Grei, a 29-year-old single mother from Medford, Ore. Three years ago Grei was stuck in an unhappy marriage with \$30,000 in debt and earning minimum wage at fast-food restaurants.

But now, thanks to her online avatar, she sells digital designs for real money. Buyers pay for them in a "Second Life" currency called Lindens. But Lindens aren't like fake Monopoly money; they can be traded for U.S. cash at online currency exchanges, at the rate of about 250 Lindens to the U.S. dollar.

Grei's most expensive item is the El Dorado, a haute couture dress that sells for 600 Lindens, or about \$2.

It seems like a small amount, but with 5,000 customers shopping at her virtual store every day, she says she has made enough money to leave her husband, pay off her debts and truly start a second life.



[Munch SL RL.jpg]

Two sides of the same person. Shannon Grei, left, a single mom who makes real money selling digital fashion designs through her avatar Munchflower Zaius, right, in Second Life. (Courtesy of Shannon Grei)



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Tateru Nino, right, one of the most popular avatars in Second Life, with her friend Mera Pixel. Tateru's real life owner suffers from autism and says the online game has helped her become socially confident. (Courtesy of Mera Pixel)



[TAT_1.jpg]

Tateru Nino is considered a social celebrity in Second Life. Her real world creator says the game has helped her overcome the debilitating shyness caused by Asperger's syndrome. (Courtesy of Mera Pixel)

“Some come in and treat it like a game, but realize quite quickly this isn't a game, this is real,” said Dr. Craig Kerley, a psychologist in Georgia who leads a 400-person virtual therapy group in "Second Life."

Linden Lab provides the digital landscape where users can build anything they desire, at no cost: a house, a pet bird, a new pair of shoes. It's like a sketchbook come to life.

But it's not just attracting struggling parents or tech geeks. Real businesses, universities, even MTV have gotten in on the act. Duran Duran gave a concert and Kurt Vonnegut gave an interview, all through their digital avatars. Harvard is offering law classes this winter inside "Second Life."

It's a pastime for some, but many avid users say the site has transformed their real lives by giving them a new career, social status and even physical freedom.

Nick Yee at Stanford's virtual reality lab has studied several online games and has seen how these environments affect people's lives.

“People gain experience in the virtual worlds that they cannot have in the real world,” Yee said. “And this gives them the courage to try things in their real lives.”

"Second Life" is particularly suited for people who suffer from social disorders like autism, Kerley said. The digital avatars lack the subtle eye movements and hand gestures that people with autism typically mistake as threatening.

Tateru Nino is an avatar in her 20s who helps new users get oriented in the game. In the last eight months she has made thousands of friends and is now considered a social celebrity.

But Tateru's real life creator is a woman in her 40s from Melbourne, Australia, who by her own admission is short-tempered and a bit of a loser. She did not want to reveal her name for fear of drawing attention to herself. She suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a developmental disorder resembling autism that is characterized by impaired social interaction.

Since Tateru's owner logged onto "Second Life" in 2005, her popular cyber personality has started to influence her life. For years she would leave the house only for work and always felt the urge to run in the company of more than a couple of people. Conversations were painful; she could talk only with someone facing the other way. But now, thanks to her cult status online, she is more confident.

“I used to be the original wallflower,” she said. “If I was wronged, I'd normally just bite down on it and walk away. Nowadays I'm more likely to stand up for myself. I'm more socially adept.”

In "Second Life," avatars communicate through instant messenger. Kerley says this written medium creates a social distance that allows shy people to open up.

“People experiment in this safer environment,” Kerley said. “Once they realize they aren't



[Kerley_Kamenev.jpg]

Craig Kamenev, above, an avatar created by Dr. Craig Kerley, a licensed psychologist, below, leads a virtual therapy group in Second Life. (Courtesy of Craig Kerley)



[Baccara_nanci.jpg]

Baccara Rhodes, above, is considered one of the best virtual wedding planners in Second Life. Her real life creator Nanci Schenkein, below, was a successful events planner before crippling multiple sclerosis forced her to retire. (Courtesy of Kevin Alderman)

thought of as stupid or weird, they give it a shot in their real life.”

Users who are physically disabled say the game gives them a chance to do what they can no longer do in the real world.

Nanci Schenkein, who is Baccara Rhodes in "Second Life," is a 53-year-old mother from New Jersey who used to be an events planner, but her crippling multiple sclerosis forced her to stop. After reading about "Second Life," she dragged out her daughter's laptop and logged on.

Schenkein started the first event planning business on "Second Life." She has planned more than 100 virtual weddings and is referred to as the “social doyenne of 'Second Life.'” Her weddings can cost 90,000 Lindens, or \$300. It's giving her a chance to relive her old life.

“I miss doing real weddings,” she said, “but that's why this is so fabulous for me. All of that creativity that had been bottled up, I'm able to bring out.”

But a highly social game can have negative effects as well. The dark side can include addiction and obsession. When users are playing 40 to 100 hours a week, they may be avoiding life altogether.

A person who keeps logging on even when they're not enjoying it or who keeps their online life a secret from friends and family may be showing signs of addiction, Kerley said.

“If you keep the two separate and are not talking about it, you run the risk that 'Second Life' can become its own reality,” he said.

There are also those who create trouble in the game. They push other avatars, beat them up or create scripts that cause explosions in front of them. Kerley says it is striking how these digital mischief-makers cause real pain. “Even though it's just one computer image jumping on another computer image, people see it as an assault.”

Grei, the inventive force behind the hot designer Munchflower Zaius, can relate. The fan attention got so intense in "Second Life" that she moved her avatar to a remote island. This is no “dumb online game like 'Dungeons and Dragons,’” she said.

Still, she's shocked at how much this world has changed her life.

“This is the first time in my life I'm financially secure,” she said. “It gave me the opportunity to leave my husband and to support my two kids on my own. I'm making more than I ever dreamed of, hands down.”

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