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"IT`S A COUNTRY?"

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Visionaries and a changing world – the challenge for Linden Lab is how to get the two together.

Early last year, Philip "Linden" Rosedale has been keen to announce to everybody who cared to listen that "Second Life was about building a country" – with its own society and economy. Linden Lab's job in the "country-building" was mostly a technical role with some gentle guiding by providing some moderation.

This assumption was easy to understand. Since all content is created by its users, Second Life is not a directed-goal enterprise. With new users every day, this would mean that slowly the virtual world will have to change, as it accomodates more and more users, each one with their unique view on what a virtual world should *be*.

What Philip and many others who "bought" the "virtual country paradigm" expected was that slowly, over time, people would congregate in this common task. Yes, one day, Second Life will be a virtual country. It already has its own culture, a society with its interests and groups, and a flourishing economy. But the big question, always, was "what is missing?" Or "how do we get from point A (today) to point B (the virtual country of tomorrow)?"

The first attempt to nudge things in the right direction failed tragically – there is no way, and highly likely will never be, that something akin to a "world government" will ever emerge from the primeval chaos of anarchic Second Life. The best some of us expected was a "federation" of similar-minded individuals, available to trade off some of their unlimited freedom, by putting their trust in elected individuals who would do some organisation overall. This kind of organisation has basically two possible outcomes: either the "corporate type" (landowners provide organisation in return for a fee) or the "cooperative type" (regular users join efforts together to pool resources like time and money to provide organisation to the overall group). Both have succeeded at small scales, although the "corporate type" has, by far, been the more successful.

Virtual economy attracts organisation

There is a good reason for that. Like in the frontier days of the Wild West expansion – or, if you prefer, like in the late 15th and early 16th century, when the Europeans suddenly found out their frontiers suddenly expanding, not by conquest, but by exploration – commerce was the major driving force. In order for commerce to succeed, you would need a stable economy. This in turn made the economy agents to self-regulate the economy together – in cartels, if you wish – so that they had a base to work on. And finally, to attract (and keep!) happy customers, it only made sense to provide them value for their money.

In almost all examples, this meant urban planning and additional mediation facilities (beyond the ones provided by Linden Lab). Thus, the economic agents provided planned communities, residential neighbourhoods, malls and bazaars, a distinctive look & feel of Second Life that was so different from the anarchic environment beyond the limits of the planned communities.

Look at the private islands as an example. There are almost none that have the "sandbox" look. Their owners have taken pains to hire virtual urban planners, designers, SL architects. Their land was terraformed to look as good as possible. They controlled and oversaw that scripts and textures would not lag the sims. They handled griefing and complains from the users. And they compete among themselves with providing service, urban planning, organisation, and mediation/moderation.

This, of course, also happens on the mainland as well – with an added difficulty. You cannot own land and have an "overseer" technically controlling that common guidelines (say, unblocking views, or too-high buildings) are enforced and followed. You can only rent land from a landlord (never own it). Still, many planned communities are based upon rentals, and *these work as well*.

Land is valuable according to added value

A simple rule slowly emerged: wherever planned communities (and this obviously includes things like malls, shopping districts or bazaars) appeared, the value of land increased. Economics feed upon order; the better you plan and organize land, the more valuable it is. This doesn't mean that land can't have some "base value" — mature land or waterfront plots are always more valuable, just because of *potential* value on what *can* be done there. Thus, the landscape — the virtual geography of SL — and the zoning (PG or Mature) influence the pricing of land. Managers of planned communities and malls took these into account when figuring out prices for buying/selling/renting land.

In a sense, this starts immediately to look like a pretty good analogy to what happens in real life. Land is not "created equal" — some plots are "better" than others. But "empty land" is less valuable than "value-added land" — where owners thoughtfully organise what is going to be placed there. As some would say, nobody wants to buy former First Land in the middle of a glorified sandbox with property lines.

But this is what happens since the 15th century at least, when countries expanded their frontiers overseas. They established order here and there. They built fortresses first, then small cities, using the natural waterways or access to sea ports. Communications infrastructures were the "attractors" for the first spots to be designated as sites for new cities. Later, when we entered the 19th century, you could build railways which would in turn become the new attractors — beyond things like access to mineral sources, something which in SL we don't have.

So, even on the landscape of a virtual world, there are "natural" spots that attract people more, and which get developed first, attracting in turn the "urban planners" who favour these spots, and increasing the value of the land by organising it properly.

Slums in RL

What happens when land is left beyond the control of the organising agents? It develops into slums. This is mostly what happened to most cities in the 20th century. When land inside organised cities became too expensive, people simply went outside the city to build — without order or organisation. These slums grew to astonishing sizes, often dwarfing the "organised cores", until governmental action tried to develop some infrastructure on the outskirts to be able to bring those the same standards of living. This, of course, has been a challenge for perhaps the last 150 years or so. Social-minded, rich governments are able to extend their facilities beyond the planned core; poor countries are not so lucky. You'll always have a split between the organised core and the unplanned slums. Fortunately for the optimists like myself, as time goes by, *all* countries become richer (although not at the same rate, sadly) and in a few centuries or millennia you'll be able to provide all residents on Planet Earth with high living standards.

Of course, assuming that the governments on Earth *wish* to do so. Without their efforts to make planned cities grow, the slums hardly will have a chance to self-organise. They'll just organically grow more and more.

... and slums in SL

Take a look at a sim with only First Land plots and compare it to a planned community. Notice the difference? Unplanned sims are the big slums of SL, where land is cheap, anarchy rules, and among hundreds of residents' plots you might find here and there one building of exceptional talent and quality. New residents moving in will buy from the cheapest land, and build whatever they like there. Despising any sort of "control", they will happily build at their pace, until one day something happens.

A neighbour will throw in something that annoys you. It might be a rotating cube, or a 300 m-high-tower, or a sign with language that offends you (but that is not strictly against the Terms of Service). What can you do about it?

You'll soon learn the answer to that: nothing. Sell your land. Move on. Start from scratch.

After a few iterations, assuming that our new resident is persistent and hasn't left SL by now, they'll come to the alternative: joining a planned community, either renting on the mainland, or owning deeds on a private island. In some extreme cases, a few planned communities on the mainland even allow you to buy land, relying upon common sense for the new owners to keep the overall look & feel. Sometimes this works; sometimes this means waiting for months for an unpleasant neighbourhood to get rid of the troublesome residents.

So, our resident is now faced with a dilemma. Shall they forfeit their "absolute freedom of building" for the security that, in a planned community, they will not have to deal with grieving? Or shall they just jump to any other place in SL to start from scratch?

Many make the first choice, although not all.

Organic growth "controlled" by economic agents

A new resident highly likely wishes to "make money fast" — almost every newbie's first question is "how do I make money?" They soon understand that the way to go is to sell something profitably. And to do that, they need a shop.

Many upgrade to Premium accounts, get their tier-free First Land, and set their shops on top of the roof of their houses. And then they wait. And wait. And wait.

Nobody comes to buy a single item from them, and this makes them ask around what they're doing wrong. And it's easy to understand. When you're outside the communication routes, it's hard to catch the attention of casual customers. And let's be honest — at the very beginning, you need those to build your customer base. Later, when you have enough casual, impulse-driven customers, you'll be able to grow through word-of-mouth, still SL's most important marketing channel.

So, how do you get the casual shoppers? Right now, this means mostly establishing yourself in the busy malls or shopping districts. Not unsurprisingly, these have been set up first near the "travel routes".

In Second Life, this means the places nearest to telehubs. This is where most people appear every day, when they wish to go somewhere else.

Now we are all familiar with this image. Railroad stations helped cities to grow organically around them. Most cities will still have their major shopping districts around the older railroad stations (nowadays probably around the bus terminals and similar travelling facilities). Anyone who has played SimCity "knows" how this works. Transportation-system terminals are the key to "organic growth": commercial districts encircle the terminals; and, by contrast, residential districts, where you wish your peace and quiet, will be established further away.

This always was an "unwritten rule". The busiest place in Second Life is still the Welcome Area — but all areas around it are closed to the public in terms of land sales. So, the economic agents had to gather around the "transportation network" — the telehubs as the single point of mobility.

It's around telehubs that you get ads (even the Linden-sponsored ads and their free content is distributed at telehubs!), shops, malls, and the high-cost commercial districts. Further away, you start to see the original landscape again, as people wish to avoid the high-traffic zones to place their homes. As we all know, both the SL railroads and the roads are "pretty" or "interesting" but without proper function, due to the limitations on the current vehicles. Thus, the only "transportation system" to drive organic growth are the telehubs. There is no other choice offered to us by Linden Lab.

Replacing the attractors of organic growth

Telehubs, of course, are a problem for some new residents, because they never quite manage to go *exactly* where they want to go. You click on the Map, a Landmark, on the Events list, on a friend's pick list... and instead of being magically transported to where you wanted to go, you'll find yourself in a place you never wish to be. Did something go wrong? Why aren't you at your intended destination? Why are you in the middle of nowhere, with ugly malls and rotating signs all around the place, instead of being at that super-cool place you wished to go?

After two or three teleports, every new user learns the truth: you can only teleport to the nearest telehub, *unless* a friend offer you a teleport. You *have* to travel that last mile by yourself — either by foot, on a vehicle, or, more likely, by flying.

For many, this is annoying. This means being dropped in the middle of a commercial district you never wished to see, fly up in the air avoiding the huge towers that try to trap you inside their walls as they slowly download from the grid, and find a "clear" route of travel (often very high up in the air) to your ultimate destination. Do this three, four times a day, every day of the week, and people start to complain.

Get enough people to complain, and Linden Lab is due to change it. That's the way Second Life seems to work. Around 100 or so avatars (not people — we don't know the ratio of avatars-to-people) voted to change this system and to get rid of telehubs. Perhaps half of that number protested loud enough on the forums. A large amount of those are new users, still not having a clue on how our virtual country is organized — they don't understand the need of planning, of zoning, of having an organized landscape, it takes a few months to understand that — and they are the ones that complain loudest: "why can't we go directly to our intended destination?? This is sooo confusing!"

(Over 88,000 users have successfully dealt with that "confusion" rather quickly, but that's besides the point)

And then there is a final blow dealt on this issue. The economic agents that plan and organise the landscape of this virtual world are successful enterprises. They are, in a sense, Rich. And this is naturally a Bad Thing. It induces an asymmetry in Second Life not unlike what happens in the real one: economic agents are naturally the pivots of the economy — they are the ones that accumulate power, land, and benefits related to both.

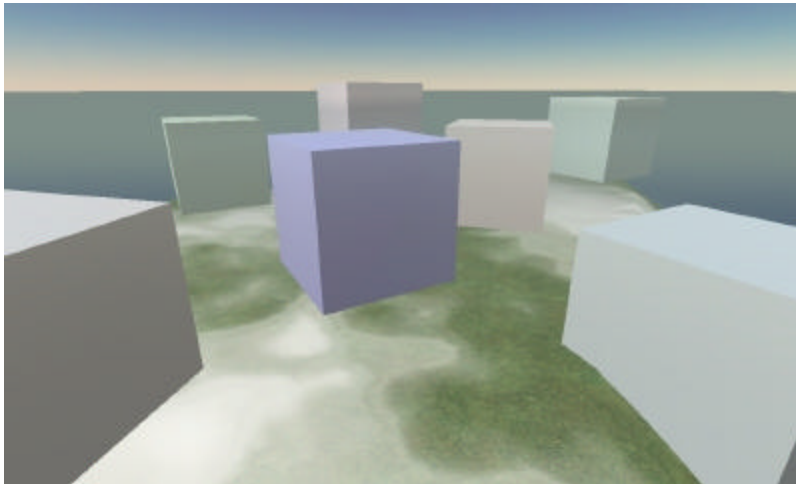
They are, in a sense, The Ones That Prevent This Virtual World To Become an Utopia. Anathema! This Ought To Be Forbidden!

By dealing a blow upon them, many seem to view this as an opportunity to balance out the field a bit more. The first step is to get rid of asymmetries on the landscape: let all land be equally worth the same! The second step is eliminating the need of urban planning: shopping districts are *not necessary* if everyone is easily available from a click on the "teleport" button on the map. There is no need to have malls or bazaars or districts to attract casual customers; people only need to search for an item and click on "teleport". So, let's abolish all this silly "commercial district planning" once and forever; let us have *choice* again!

These arguments are very hard to contradict. You see, they build upon a very strong premise: this is *not* a virtual country, and it should *not* be one, because a virtual country will eventually develop asymmetries between its residents. By making all land "democratically" equal and removing one opportunity to create asymmetries, the virtual country — becomes a virtual country no more. And that is a Good Thing.

So what do these 50 or 100 residents *want*? They wish that the believers on virtual countries go away. What they wish is a glorified sandbox, extending for km and km on the grid, and a 3D chatroom. All the rest is worthless and silly to implement.

Most residents have previously used other virtual reality platforms, either game-type MMORPGs or social MMOGs like IMVU, There, or The Sims Online, among others. On those platforms it was absolutely unthinkable to talk about concepts like "virtual countries". What people wish is escapism — the glorified giant sandbox *cum* chatroom which is what other platforms provide. And they wish SL to become like that.



In a few months, this is what Second Life will probably look like. Interesting high-quality content will be inside the boxes where people will meet, shop, and chat.

By reintroducing point-to-point teleport, Linden Lab is complying with those wishes. It's not unnatural they're willing to do that. They have "observed their competition carefully", as they are now so fond of telling us. They are listening to (some) of their customers, who wish a Second Life that is more akin to the competition. And more important than that, they wish happy customers, that upgrade to Premium accounts, and buy cheap land (or existing Premium account customers to tier up). By levelling out asymmetries on the land market, by forcing the economy agents to completely change their strategies (and eventually leave SL forever), land is going to become more cheap, and more available.

If all goes well, this will mean more land sales. Which is Good for Linden Lab. If people are *not* going to buy more cheap land, it's still good — it will mean lots of empty plots that can be re-auctioned. No more complains from new Premium users about the lack of First Land. And the rate of deployment of new servers can be diminished — so, Linden Lab will need less investment per month, and have reduced costs.

More happy customers, more land transactions, less overall costs, and an SL that looks much more like the competition's platforms. It's all Good. No wonder they have reversed their previous decision and is planning to re-introduce point-to-point teleporting. It makes sense from a business' point of view.

Bye bye virtual country

In the forums, as well as in some in-world conversations, people have accused me of being a "doomsayer" or of wishing to cling to a mythical past and refusing to adapt to change by promoting the existence of the telehubs that nobody loves. This is an issue that is a bit complex to explain and I'm not sure if even this article is able to convey my feelings on the matter.

Change *is* good. I'm a firm believer that SL, with its incredibly swift pace of change, is overall succeeding because so many people are quickly adapting to change. I remember the discussions almost a year ago when Linden Lab removed the event stipends. Doomsayers were announcing that SL would lose all its social value, since nobody would ever host quality events any more. At those days, we had perhaps 30 or so events per day. We now reach almost 250 events per day. Of course, almost all of them are of a commercial nature — it only makes sense, since it's the only way to sponsor them. This change was akin to the move from state-owned TV to private ones. Remove central sponsorships, and what remains is private initiative: in terms of events, this means that people will only host the kind of events that both attract people and give a financial return to the event hoster. So, bye bye creative or cultural events; they still exist but are simply buried below a ton of "money-making" events these days.

At that time, SL lost something, to be replaced by something new. It was definitely not the biggest change. These days, people get half of their weekly stipends (for a Premium user) or even a tenth of it (for Basic users). This means that residents have less money to spend, and naturally people thought this would stop the economy. Rather the contrary — it controlled the inflation and kept the Linden dollar very stable on the money exchanges (despite all problems related to *that* issue). Residents either got a job in SL (ie. they became more creative to earn more L\$) or they started to regularly buy L\$ from the money exchanges. All in all, this did not imbalance our "virtual country" much.

The re-introduction of point-to-point teleporting will also *not* crush Second Life once and for all. Despite my personal feelings about it, what will happen is that new residents will never know what happened before. For them, point-to-point teleporting will be *normal*. Due to the growth of Second Life, in a year or so, only a quarter of the population will *remember* how things were with the telehubs as attractors for organic growth. Three quarters of the new residents will naturally be "happy customers" — they will be *used* to the concept of "the giant sandbox". They will *love* it. They might admire the planned communities popping up on the islands (in a year I expect that more people will live on the private islands than on the mainland) but they won't ever understand why anyone would like the mainland to get "organised". They won't ever admire the landscape or have any idea on why it is important. Content will be inside boxes (like on the picture above) and people will directly teleport inside them, nobody will ever think how it could be otherwise. This will be "normal" for Second Life, in spite of being "alien" right now.

Of course this won't be the "doom" of Second Life. So people like Anshe Chung will have lost US\$20,000 due to investments in the telehub areas. Who cares? The 250,000 users of 2006 will not ever understand the *issue*, not to mention *caring* about it. This is the most important difference: only visionaries and planners of virtual countries will be affected by this development. And how many of the other residents have, in truth, understood why it is important to be building a "virtual world" instead of a glorified sandbox? I personally have just met a handful — yes, perhaps 30-50 or so. Sadly, they're almost all on the Hate List of the remaining residents — they're land barons, mall owners, organisers of planned communities, architects, RL urban planners. Nobody really cares about these Evil People — they're viewed with suspicion, since they were successfully building a virtual country. By pushing them off the face of the world, almost literally, LL is showing that they are looking to the average residents' best interests: get rid of this silly "country building", give us the sandbox instead.

So, the Lindens said, "let there be a sandbox"! And they saw it was Good.

Why is a virtual country *important* after all?

So many very intelligent people I've been talking to about this issue don't seem to understand the *importance* of building a virtual country. They're right when they say that Second Life won't disappear overnight (according to some, notably some Lindens, new users will be so thankful of having point-to-point teleport, that it's more than likely that Second Life will grow more and faster (and LL will have less costs) in the near future. They are also right to say that the big content creators won't be affected at all (they are established businesses by now, and they'll get new customers in their private islands anyway — more likely, they will have less costs, since they won't need to invest in several "chain shops", but concentrate on a single shop instead, thus, reducing costs, and eventually drop their prices). They're perhaps even right when they admit that the lesser content creators will get more customers this way — *if* we get better searching tools, this will mean that people will just throw in a few keywords to search for, and go *directly* to the small content creator's shop, instead of wasting precious time navigating across miles and miles of ugly towers and rotating signs. All this is definitely true.

There are some urban planners who also believe they are able to create their own "attractors" — replacing telehubs with their unique creations. This might also work for a while. Historically, however, "building a country" *needs* attractors. The urban planners in SL believe that they can replace "artificial" ones (the telehubs) by lovely builds that will make people stop there for a while, and organize space according to popularity.

Well, I once pointed out that the second revolution on the World-Wide Web came with the appearance of the search engines. Before Google (and friends), the WWW also had its "attractors" — portals, filled with content, which were the "entrypoints" for casual navigators. People started from certain points and followed links from there. Web designers concentrated on designing thoughtful homepages which would gather interested parties as well as casual browsers, and they expected people to return to them because it was the only way to "navigate" across the virtual world of the Web.

Google challenged all that. A homepage is unimportant if you can directly go to any page, provided you have good search tools (and Google's are the next best thing to perfection). So, the "portal market" became suddenly unimportant. People simply search for what they wish to find. It's not unsurprising to see that all major Web ventures — eBay, Amazon, the Wikipedia, even dating services... — rely strongly on very good search tools instead of a "cool" -looking homepage. They know that their customers will go directly to the content that interests *them*, and they have redesigned their pages to allow for that.

In a sense, what happened on the Web is that you're slowly losing the importance of "attractors" (beyond the search engines!) and good-looking pages, and concentrate only on functionality and information retrieval. People want information *fast*, not nifty and cool-looking pages. Design is once more becoming minimalist and functional; the Web is once more becoming a tool for information retrieval, and not the building blocks for a "digital country".

This is precisely what is going to happen to Second Life as well. The "searchable sandbox" metaphor will apply to SL — you'll have isolated spots on the grid where you'll spend all your time. Your "navigation" across SL will be from point to point, according to what you wish to do. One place will look much like any other — since you just need to teleport there. People will still politely say things like "oh, nice view" but in truth they won't really care about the view — they'll only care about where to retrieve content quickly and efficiently.

In a sense, SL will be a place of isolated chatrooms, linked together through point-to-point teleporting. People will not care what is "in-between" (like they don't care about it in IMVU or MOOVE). It won't simply *interest* them. Notions like urban planning or organic growth will simply not fit in this model — what will be important is the ultimate destination, not how and why you get there.

Very likely, in a short time, you'll also get the equivalent of "webrings" in SL. You go to a spot directly after you did a search; from there, people will offer you new spots to link to (ie. landmarks). So you'll travel randomly across the grid, by picking landmarks according to your wishes. People will look at the map of Second Life as something outdated and futile; yes, it looks good on the homepage for <http://secondlife.com>, but it doesn't fit any purpose at all. You have all seems maps of the Internet; they also don't relate to anything useful!

This will definitely not "destroy" Second Life, or "destroy" SL's economy, or make everybody go away in disgust, or anything like that. The only thing that will happen is that Second Life won't be a "virtual country" any more — ever again. It will be a collection of snapshots linked together by teleports. The notion of SL urban planning will fade in the background; it won't be *necessary*. Zoning, even artificial zoning, will be pointless; you'll have, once more, clubs near to Tringo halls, casinos near to homes, all on cheap land, and quite likely they won't bother you, since you'll live *inside* and close the windows. People won't wish to live in neighbourhoods, since it's pointless to meet your friends and neighbours by travelling to them by foot or by flying — they'll be only a teleport away.

Every place will look like any other. That is the future of SL — a levelled-out landscape. Even today, this is already true to an extent (just take a look at a sim full of First Landers, and you'll see what I mean), but at least people had the choice to escape all that and go to live on planned communities instead. But these will be quite worthless in the future.

I also agree that some exceptions will be the "future attractors" of SL. Midnight City, for instance, is a quite well-planned virtual island. When you teleport to there, you'll be at a main square, full with the most important shops. Just navigate around it for a bit and you'll see that there is quite an intelligent design behind it. The same applies to many other private islands, like Rue d'Alliez or Dreamland (or even Neualtenburg). We humans are conditioned by centuries of urban planning, and quite likely this trend will not diminish on the private islands, just because their owners will be able to impose their wishes upon the landscape.

Not so on the mainland. Many have argued that people will get naturally attracted to beautiful buildings, and these will *become* the new attractions. I disagree with that concept, because that's not what happens right now, and we certainly already have tons of lovely attractions on the mainland — often far away from telehubs. There are a *few* exceptions, of course. But the truth is that some of the more amazing builds are far away from available land — an inconsistency which perhaps explains why this never happened in the current mainland. For instance, Nexus Prime, the cyberpunk city in Gibson and Bonifacio, has been around since Beta — almost three years now. It's an awesome and fantastic place. Thus, it would make sense that people interested in cyberpunk would congregate around the city, and extend it with their own themed buildings. But this is impossible, since all land around it is protected land! Other examples are Abbot's, or even the Welcome Area, or Luna, or many other "attractors" that you care to mention. You'll see that they exist — and they're isolated from the rest of the mainland, surrounded by protected land.

There *are* some exceptions, of course. One of my homes is at the old sim of Io. Nearby in Ganymede is RiverWalk, a park for artists that extends also a bit into Io (which is sparsely inhabited). Owners of land bordering the RiverWalk Park have, to a degree, tried to blend their builds into the overall scenario — organically, not in a planned way. I had a similar experience when I was living in Uli, also sparsely inhabited, and where people tended to contribute to their neighbours' builds by smoothly integrating their buildings with the landscape. This is something that happens in many places — Slate, Luskwood, and several others. But you can name them all in a paragraph. That's all there is.

Linden Lab is also trying once more to reintroduce some planned communities of their own, by providing "rented homes for Premium users" (an

alleged benefit for upgrading to Premium). They also previously had a few "planned communities" like the camping site and the suburban Black sim. Again, these are isolated exceptions. To have organic growth, it means that people will be drawn to those locations, and wish to grow from there in concentric circles. This simply doesn't happen, except by accident or on a very small scale.

While living on Uli, I used to travel less than today. Uli is an old sim, part of the Volcano Island chain of sims. While the quality of the builds differed substantially from sim to sim, I tended to live in the neighbouring sims and find there everything I needed. There was a "community mall" near the telehub (later bought by Anshe, who improved it a lot). The first Plush club was nearby, and I admit I went there once or twice while it was something like "your neighbourhood club". There were a few scattered shops around, of small-scale designers, but which I favoured. There were gathering places where I held my first events. There was a Beach Club nearby where people met occasionally, and even some homes near the Beach Club, because it was "cool" to live by a place which attracted people. Now all this was "organic growth", unplanned, and not designed. Why? Because there was a telehub in the middle of those sims, and people tended to live around their neighbourhoods. This, of course, was the work of several months — organic growth comes at the expense of time.

Point-to-point teleport will mean that this kind of organic growth will simply be pointless. *Everyplace* will be your neighbourhood, just a point-and-click away.

Conclusions

Is it *important* that we have to develop "organic growth", urban planning, and a "virtual country"?

Well, the answer is not easy, and there is no single answer that satisfies everybody. For Linden Lab as a successfully-run company, the answer is no. You can get rid of all those and still make money. As a matter of fact, what several Lindens seem to tell us is that by getting rid of the crazy "virtual country" idea they'll probably reduce costs, get more users, make more users upgrade to Premium, make more Premium users increase tier, and well, make more money overall. So for Linden Lab this is a good marketing decision. I've already scratched my favourite quote from Philip "Linden" Rosedale from my signature ("I'm not building a game. I'm building a virtual world."). It's now history.

For the new users, entering SL's society and economy is often challenging. Understanding how to buy land — where to buy it, and why the land is valued differently depending on location — is often confusing. So, getting rid of all this silly nonsense will make the new users more happy.

The established content creators are happy. Point-to-point teleport will mean less competition from start-up designers (no more malls for casual users) and reducing their costs (no more need for chains of stores everywhere). So, for them, the "virtual country" just means extra costs and more competition: getting rid of it only benefits them.

Even the start-up designers dislike the "virtual country" concept. Under the new model, a small shop will be as easy to find as a large one. From the perspective of someone searching for "sexy lingerie", it'll be as easy to find Jane Doe's shop as Aimee Weber's. So, the small designers view the change as positive. For them, it's all about being able to compete with the established designers without investing more in marketing strategies.

(Sadly, if that were true, it would mean that Jane Doe's Sexy Outfits Shop in RL would be able to get more sales through Google than Victoria's Secret, since Google levels out the field. Think again. This is simply not true)

Casual shoppers are happy. They can now pick the places they wish to go, instead of getting trapped into malls which rezzed in front of the telehubs. Well, this might be right, but it also means that you'll shop much more from established designers and never learn about new start-ups. Of course, that's also how things work in RL.

Old-timers are happy. Mall owners will go away, land barons will get bankrupt, land value will drop crazily, and even probably the L\$ will fall (meaning that you'll be able to buy much more L\$ with a single US\$). This is a typical attitude from an egotistical point of view, which sadly affects so many of SL's residents: by failing to understand concepts like "the group is more than the sum of its individuals", they see only immediate benefits for themselves. Yes, it's true that land will be cheap, and probably the L\$ will fall, and that the land barons will move to private islands, and for every individual in SL, these are Good Things. But it will also mean that SL as a whole will never be a "community" or a "metaverse", but just a "group of individuals", each one living in their favourite spots.

A recent argument is that this will even be good from a technical point of view, reducing the load on the poor asset servers, since for arriving at a destination, on average, every person needed to cross 3 sims. Now they'll immediately drop on their destination — just one "hit" on the database servers. That's true. But it's also true that people will use point-to-point teleport much more, so I guess it will balance out at the end.

A much-repeated phrase is that "this will enhance everybody's experience". Well, I'm used to marketing phrases that don't say anything. Taken from a certain point of view, *everything* enhances your experience. And if you wish, you can even make a survey to back up your claims: ask each and every user if they prefer point-to-point teleport, and, after introducing it, if they're happier about it. My guess is that 90% of the people would say

"yes" to both questions. Conclusion: everybody's experience was "enhanced".

Think again. Imagine a referendum made on a western country where the Government would ask their citizens if they should abolish taxes. Over 90% of the citizens would answer "yes" — have no doubts about it! So, should the Government abolish taxes because it would enhance every citizen's experience?

(Now you know why they never ask us such things :))

Demolishing the notion of the "virtual country" by giving us the glorified sandbox *cum* chatroom is a big step. From my point of view — shared by all who believed in the virtual country metaphor — it is not necessarily "good" or "bad". It means reshuffling the deck of cards and dealing again: we're now playing a different game. Some will drop the game and shake their heads in disgust, but the truth is, most of the players will get a new hand of cards and learn the rules of the new game. The problem here is what opportunity we're losing in order to make more people happy under the new system.

A finishing thought: most countries in the western world are representative democracies (except for Switzerland) and not base democracies. Did you ever think a bit about "why"? The truth is, your average voter doesn't really *know* what is good for them. They may simply not have the available data to make a pondered decision, or they may not be qualified enough to make one. Like on the issue of taxes, it's best not to ask people what they think that is good for them. In almost all cases, and this is what History has shown us uncountable times, people simply don't know what is good for them as a group, long-term. They cannot see beyond their immediate satisfaction.

In real life, we live in a structured society, where people take decisions according to their level of experience and training. We are a specialized society, having grown from the days where everybody was required to do almost everything to survive — from building your own home, to hunting or gathering plants, from cooking to raising your children. What we call the "modern" world is a place where people fill in niches where they excel in their skills and abilities — for the overall good of everyone. Specialization brings us a more sophisticated society, with an advanced level of quality that was unthinkable on pre-civilized ones. We gravitate towards those areas that interest us most and develop our skills in them. Overall, this means progress, civilization, quality, and faster development — not to mention a more "fair" society, where everybody is able to deploy their own skills more efficiently. Sadly, the other side of the coin is that we are not all "equal" and that asymmetries will inevitably set in. This is the downside of a specialized society — but, overall, most societies will agree that it's "the lesser evil" when compared to the alternative.

We have seen this happening in Second Life as well, where time was compressed. Like a real country, Second Life's residents gravitated to niches where they could fully deploy their skills, desires, and wishes. A side effect of this virtual country is that it soon became asymmetric — talented designers selling more, successful business owners becoming more rich, development starting organically near telehubs, and so on. The "average" resident — ie. over 90% of the population — felt that this asymmetry was getting too evident and demanded that the deck of cards was reshuffled, because it was "unfair". Linden Lab complied. Reset the virtual world, start from scratch again. And good luck on the new world!

I don't think that new asymmetries won't emerge again (it's in human nature, after all). What I fear is that opportunities for building a virtual world are now seriously set back a few years. SL needed 2 or 3 years to grow to the point we were now — and incredibly enough, this was all brought about because of the introduction of telehubs, 2 years ago! Will we need 2 years to develop a new virtual country under the new assumptions? Or will the hurdles be so great this time that it will take either much more — or even be never accomplished at all? That is the question I ask myself every day. I look upon companies still setting up Web portals and ignoring Google's new "reshuffling of the deck" and disappearing after a few months, shaking their heads because they could not understand that the Web changed dramatically. People are still setting up cute homepages, despite their being basically worthless — only access to content matters. The same will happen in SL. People will still try to create "artificial attractors" for urban development (even LL is doing the same with their own planned communities!). But I'm not sure if they will succeed. At the very best, this will mean that the importance of private islands with their Estate Tools will rise. LL has also talked a bit about providing similar tools on the mainland — perhaps on 1.8, perhaps on 2.0. Until we wait for that to happen (which will eventually never come, like the "running joke" of Havok 2, the Linux version, inter-object communication, better XML/RPC, better avatars...), private islands will be the place to be. And the mainland... well, the mainland will become "wasteland".

[gwyneth](#)