

# Living a Second Life

Maximize your experience in the virtual world **BY JOE HUTSKO**

**Y**ou've no doubt heard the buzz about Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)), the online world where people create virtual second selves. Mac users are as welcome as anyone else in this world, but the simulation was originally developed for Windows, so some aspects of Second Life work differently on a Mac. Here's how to make yourself at home in Second Life with the least amount of real-life stress.

## Getting Started

Even if you've never explored Second Life—or any other virtual world—it's easy to start the process. Download the program, install it, and follow the prompts to create a new account. Log

in, and a series of prompts guides you through the basics, such as how to interact with the environment and how to customize your character's look. This avatar can be whomever (or whatever) you want. A free-spirited beach boy? A seductress in stilettos? A cat with tattoos and a wizard's cap? Your appearance is entirely up to you.

This freedom also applies to what you do with your new persona. You can simply wander—or fly—from one location to another, taking in the sights and chatting with your fellow virtual residents. Or you can stake a claim, buying some virtual land (with Second Life's currency, Linden Dollars) and starting your own virtual business (which some Second Lifers are turning into real-world bucks).

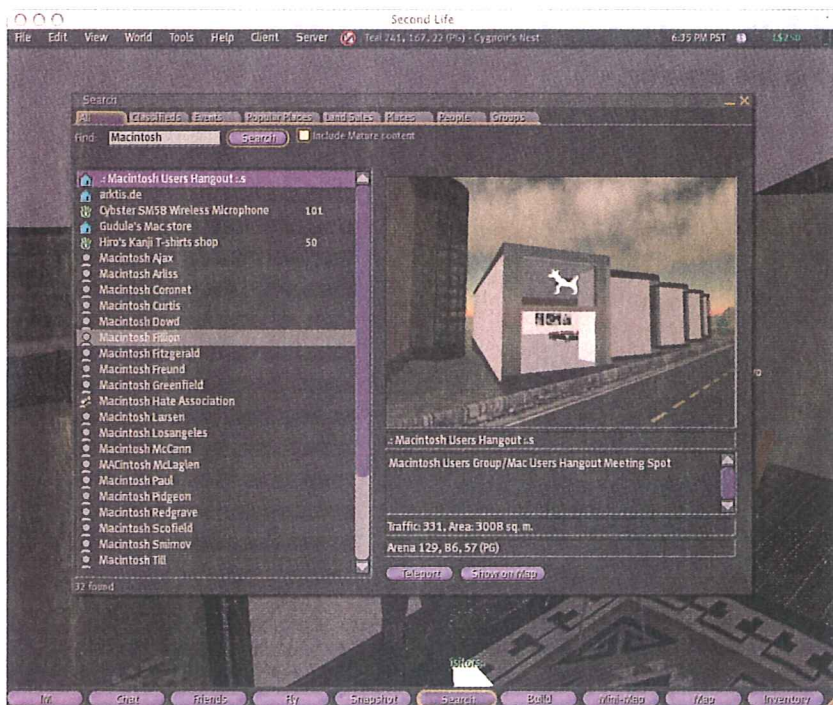
For further tips in Second Life, click on the Search button at the bottom of the screen to open the search tool. Type in **orientation island** to locate, and then teleport to, the place where new Second Life folks can get acquainted with what's what. When you're ready to explore more, click on the Places tab in the search tool, type **Macintosh** in the Find field, click on Macintosh User Hangout, and then click on Teleport to instantly transport to a place frequented by Mac folks (see "Look for Mac Users"). Mosey over to the corkboard on the wall to view and post messages, and meet for live chats with other Mac users.

## Fumble Fingers

Many of the problems Mac users first encounter in Second Life have to do with keyboard and mouse commands.

For example, right-clicking is essential in Second Life. The software assumes that you have a two-button mouse for interacting with the environment and objects. If you don't have one, use the standard control-click to simulate a right-click. MacBook owners can also hold two fingertips on the trackpad while clicking the trackpad button to simulate a right-click. (To enable this feature, go to the Keyboard & Mouse preference pane's Trackpad tab, and select the Place Two Fingers On Trackpad And Click Button For Secondary Click option.)

For commands that call for the Windows alt key (such as controlling the camera through which you view your virtual world), Mac users press the option key instead. For example, you can switch between full-screen and windowed mode by holding down option and pressing return. You also use the option key to control the camera view. Move the cursor over what you want to zoom in on or away



**Look for Mac Users** Using Second Life's search tool, you can find the virtual hangouts of your fellow Mac users.

from; then hold down the option key as you click and hold down the mouse button. Now you can move the mouse up, down, and sideways to zoom in on an object, a character—even yourself.

If you're migrating from the Windows version of Second Life, take note: The page up and page down keys don't automatically control rising and descending in the Mac version. Instead, press F to start flying, and then you can press page up or page down to fly higher or lower.

### Living with Lagging

As you're getting familiar with the keyboard and mouse, you may get the feeling that your movements, clicks, and commands aren't happening in real time. The trouble isn't you; rather, it's a combination of the Second Life environment and your Mac's hardware.

This lag is by far the biggest headache I've encountered while playing Second Life on a Mac. Part of the problem has to do with bandwidth. Millions of bits must be rendered in real time as you and other people move within the Second Life universe. And all that processing has to be communicated back and forth over the Net. So both the processing power of your Mac and the speed of your Net connection have a big impact on your Second Life experience. If you have a choice, use your fastest Mac—the one with the most memory and the best video card—for Second Life, rather than your spare PowerBook G4.

Also, shut down any unnecessary applications that are running—Second Life needs all the processing attention and Net bandwidth it can grab.

### Life Adjustments

Another thing you can do to optimize performance is to make a few adjustments to Second Life's software. The following tweaks should help make Second Life feel more natural.

Choose Preferences from Second Life's Edit menu. Start with the Network tab. Increasing the maximum bandwidth dedicated to Second Life will make objects and fellow residents appear more quickly. But be careful—pushing the Maximum Bandwidth slider too far will bog down your Mac. Second Life's documentation recom-

## Second Life Opens Up

Second Life has always been a pretty open place where users can set up shop and sell virtual land, homes, clothing, jewelry, hairdos, and thousands of other invented objects. And Second Life's maker, Linden Labs, has recently expanded this already expansive universe by making its viewer software open source. For Mac users, that could mean a more enjoyable life in Second Life.

That's because Mac-savvy programmers can now tweak the Mac client, changing the look-and-feel or the command interface. Linden Labs will evaluate and approve modifications to the viewer, and programmers who get the nod will split the copyright with the company. Linden Labs will continue to update and offer an official Second Life viewer for users to download. The company also intends to open up the server software code that the virtual world of Second Life depends on; as of press time, no release date for that had yet been announced.



mends that you set the bandwidth rate to just below your Net connection's maximum upload speed. (To find out what that is, you can go to a free speed-test site such as Speakeasy Speed Test [[www.speakeasy.net/speedtest](http://www.speakeasy.net/speedtest)].) To see your actual performance statistics, press ⌘-shift-1. While you're in the Network tab, you can also set your disk cache. If you've got a lot of free hard-disk space, pick 1,000MB; otherwise, select as much as you can spare.

Now go to the Graphics tab. Select the Auto Detect option if it isn't already chosen. This allows the Second Life software to choose the best size and aspect-ratio settings for your Mac. If you have a wide-screen display, feel free to override that setting and choose 16:9 (wide-screen). Now set Draw Distance to 128 meters, which will let you see a reasonable distance without overtaxing your Mac.

Next, click on the Graphics Detail tab. The rule here is simple: Lowering the detail settings will improve overall performance. Deselect all the options in the shaders; that'll sacrifice some object shininess and water special effects, but you'll gain performance. (Some of those options may be grayed out, depending on your hardware.) Choose Normal for Avatar Rendering, Sun And Moon Only, and Low for Terrain Detail. Set each of the four Mesh Detail sliders to the middle. If you want to max out one of them (at the expense of performance), choose Avatar Mesh Detail; that'll let you see your fellow Second Life residents in all

their glory. Experiment with the other Mesh Detail settings to determine whether the performance gains are worth the loss of detail.

The Adv. Graphics tab provides additional video options. You should turn Anisotropic Filtering off, keep the Gamma setting at 0.00, and leave the Nighttime Brightness setting at 1.0 (the default). Be sure to select the Enable AGP option if your Mac has a dedicated graphics card. (To find out, choose About This Mac from the Apple menu, and then click on the More Info button to launch System Profiler. Click on Graphics/Displays in the left column and look for the Bus entry; if your Mac has AGP, it'll say so there.) And choose the highest Graphics Card Memory option that isn't grayed out. Lowering the Fog Distance Ratio setting decreases overall visibility in the distance—a good thing when you're running Second Life on a slower Mac. Leave the Max. Particle Count and Outfit Composite Limit settings at their default rates (4,096 and 5, respectively). These ensure a reasonably fine environment and acceptable avatar-clothing detail and effects.

To finish, go to the Audio & Video tab and deselect the Play Streaming Music When Available option. That'll keep Second Life tunes from sucking up your bandwidth. Just remember to turn the option on again before attending a live music performance in Second Life. ☒

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