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**MSc Digital Anthropology  
Practical Project**

**Wastelanders:  
An online survey of a Second Life community**

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December 2010**

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## Introduction

This project was designed to illuminate the topic of participation in a virtual community and, to this end, was targeted at residents and regular visitors to The Wastelands, a Post-Apocalyptic (PA) themed area of 12 regions (simulators or 'sims') in the virtual world of Second Life.

Second Life (SL) is owned by Linden Research LLC (known colloquially as Linden Lab) and is currently the largest proprietary virtual environment that is not classified as a game, though user-created games exist within SL. It has a large user base, with typically 60,000+ concurrently logged-in users at peak times<sup>1</sup>.

Many themed environments exist within SL, including dystopian/cyberpunk, furry, adult, sci-fi, western, gothic/horror and abstract, as well as myriad others including the popular, 'Mad Max' style of Post-Apocalyptic region such as The Wastelands. Second Life also contains numerous imitations of 'real life' (RL) places, such as London and Berlin.

A survey was undertaken by volunteer informants to gather basic demographic data, information about SL usage, preferences as to other forms of post-apocalyptic media, and qualitative information regarding their impressions of the WL community and environment.

## Technology Utilised by The Project

The Second Life environment was accessed using the Imprudence viewer, as opposed to the official Linden Lab product. This was due solely to personal preference.

The survey data was collected online via Survey Monkey, using a basic, free account which limits the number of question per survey to 10, and has a restricted feature set available for online analysis and download. The data was entered into a spreadsheet (Open Office Calc) for analysis. The data is presented in a later section.

Screen captures and in-world 'snapshots' were processed and compressed using Adobe Image Ready.

## Approaching Potential Respondents

The Wastelands is devoid of completely new SL users ('newbies') due to a requirement for avatars to be at least one week old before they can enter any of the regions, but it does attract a lot explorers and passing traffic. For this project it was decided to concentrate on regular visitors and residents, as other users would not be relevant to the research question. Approaches to potential respondents were limited to the WL community forums and in-world groups, such as 'The Wastelands' and 'Ruin't Nation: Official Wastelands Role Play'.

The following message was posted to the web-based forum:

*"Hello All*

*I am a digital anthropology student with a particular interest in post-apocalyptic environments in virtual worlds.*

*I have created a (very short) survey for Wastelanders, to illuminate the topic of participation in these kind of environments, and would greatly appreciate it if you could take part at*

*<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3FH6XMX>*

*Thanks in advance. "*

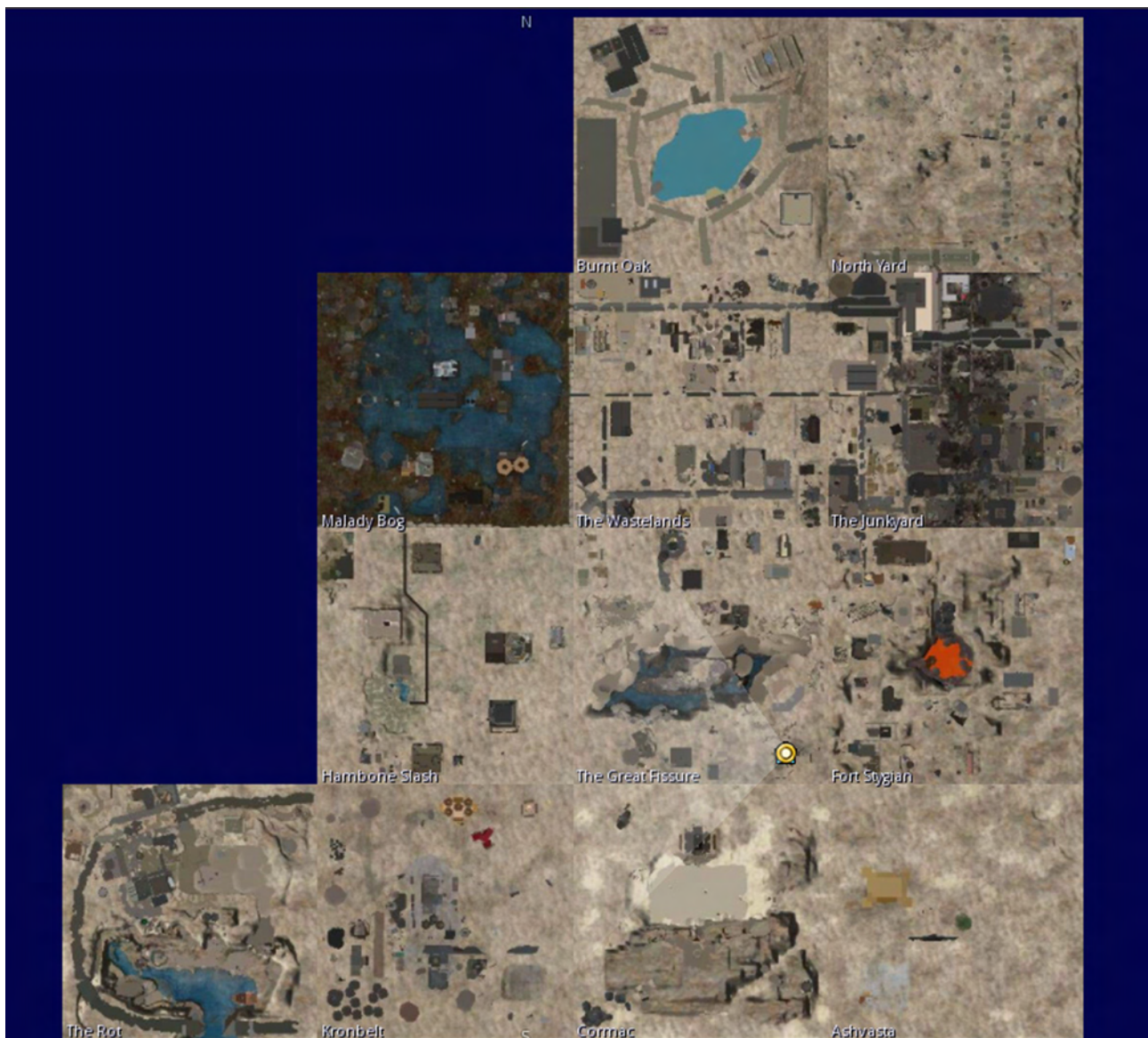
After consultation with the owner of the WL it was decided that group notices (an asynchronous messaging method) would constitute spam and should be avoided, but Instant Messages to the groups would be acceptable, so similar messages were sent via this method.

## The Wastelands

There are several Post-Apocalyptic areas in SL, but The Wastelands (WL) is the oldest and most established of these, having been established in January 2007. It currently has approximately 210 full 'residents' who rent plots of virtual land in the various regions, and nearly 700 members of the role playing community<sup>2</sup>.

The region hosts regular gaming events, frequent musical performances and DJ sets and a periodic film night.

## The Environment



**Fig.1** The Wastelands collection of regions, from the Imprudence viewer map



## The 'Full-Spec' Regions

As the above map view shows, WL consists of the original simulator, The Wastelands, together with a further five 'full' sims (Malady Bog, The Junkyard, Hambone Slash, The Great Fissure and Fort Stygian) each of which is capable of supporting up to 80 avatars. Other regions are lower-spec 'homesteads' (see below).

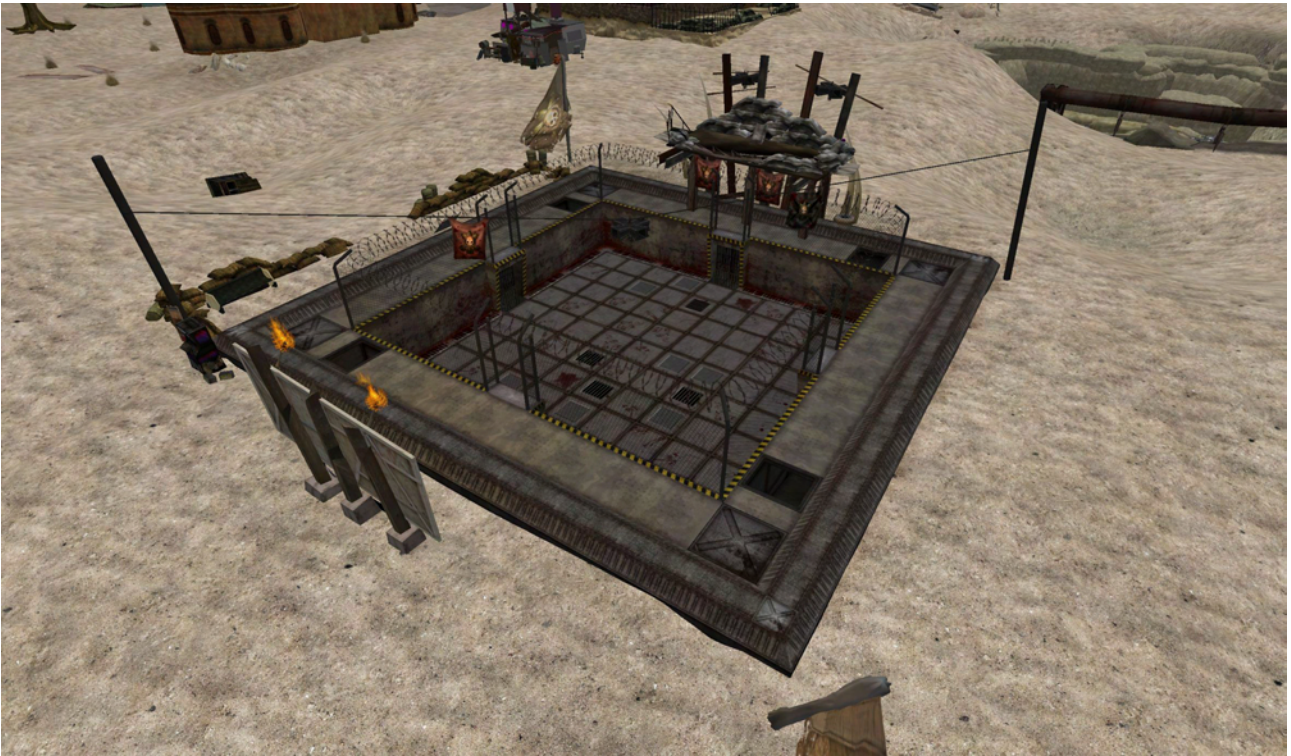


**Fig.2** 'The Bunker' – underground landing point in The Wastelands



**Fig.3** 'The Volcano' – the main landmark in Fort Stygian



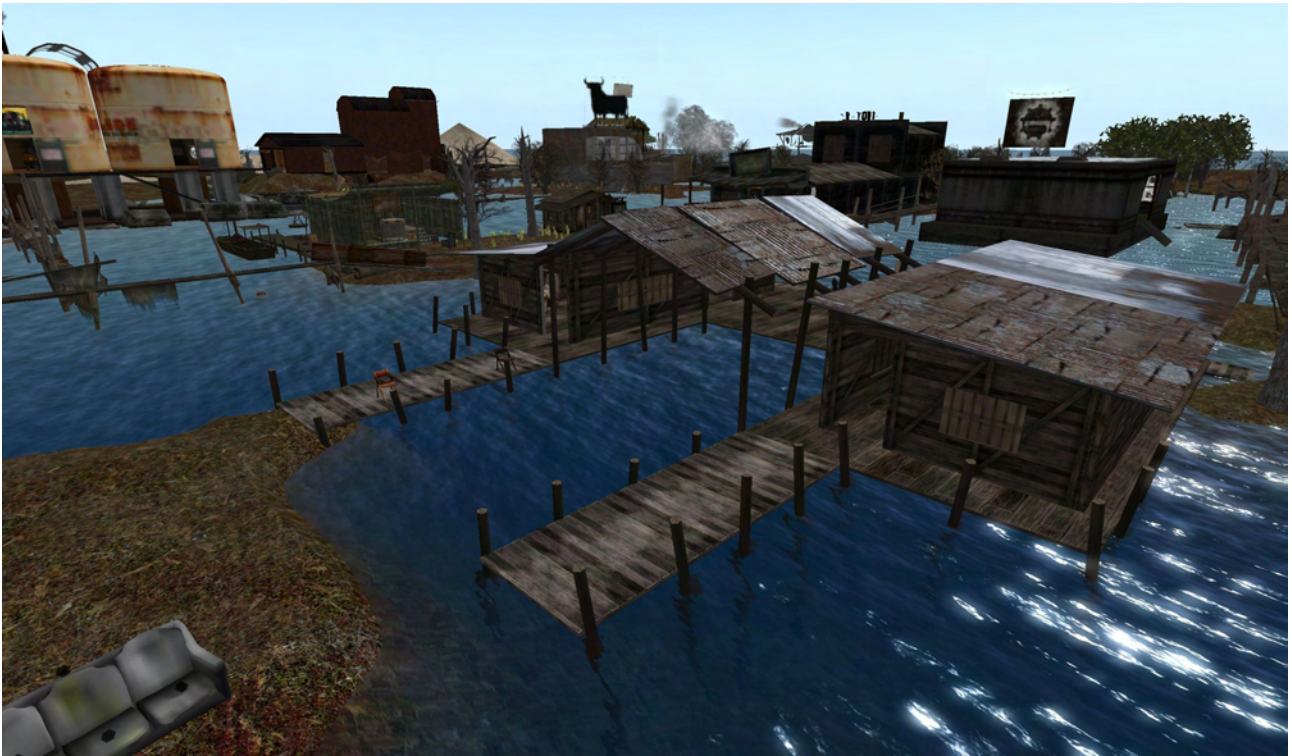


**Fig.4** 'The Fight Pit' – venue for weekly 'Fight Night' events in Hambone Slash (see 'Events' for details)



**Fig.5** 'The Junk Stage' – the original WL music venue in The Junkyard





**Fig.6** The default landing point in Malady Bog



**Fig.7** 'The Atropine' – music venue in The Great Fissure. The 'Chauseum', venue for 'Taunt the Mutant' can be seen in the background (see 'Events' for details)

The fully-featured sims tend to be broken into rental plots and all contain some communal 'admin land', used for landscaping or events. Each region has a unique character; Fort Stygian is designed to be for derelict, military-style builds for example, while Malady Bog is (as the name implies) a marsh rather than a desert - the other regions are predominantly 'dry' in nature.



## The 'Homestead' or 'Barrens' Regions

The remaining areas (Burnt Oak, North Yard, The Rot, Kronbelt, Cormac and Ashvasta) are lower-specification regions known as 'homesteads'; these can support 20 avatars simultaneously, allow fewer primitives (or 'prims') for building, and tend to be solely owned by a single resident.

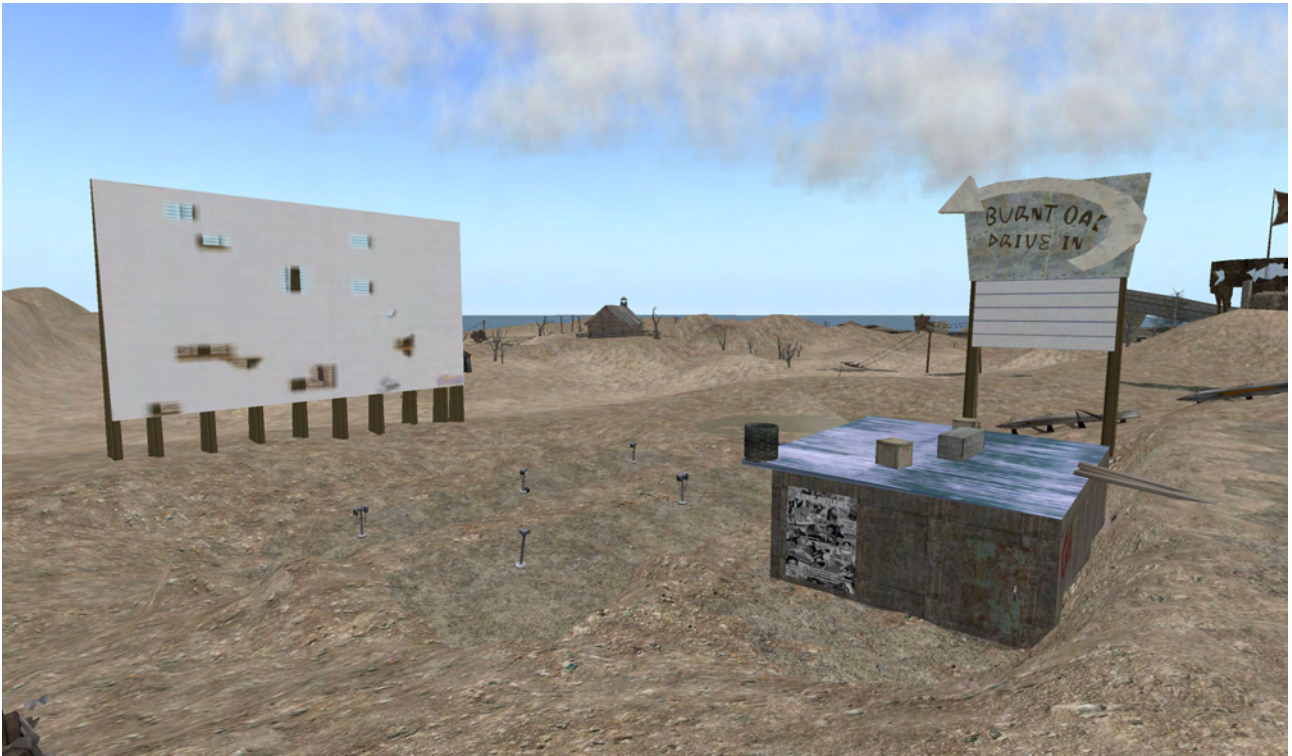


**Fig.8** Cabeza Muerta ('Death Head') court in Cormac (see 'Events' for details)



**Fig.9** Concrete bunker interior from Ashvasta





**Fig.10** 'The Burnt Oak Drive-In' movie theatre in Burnt Oak (see 'Events' for details)



**Fig.11** 'Union Carbide Plant' in Kronbelt





**Fig.12** A derelict highway in North Yard. In the distance, collapsing freeway overpasses in The Junkyard can be seen (see fig. 5)



**Fig.13** A rusty boat and a derelict bridge in The Rot

As a result of the nature of ownership, the 'barrens' areas tend to be themed in a quite specific ways; Cormac, for example, is designed to be a site of archaeological interest, with 'relic excavation' being the main interest of the owner, though it also features a 'Death Head' court for staging sports events, as seen in fig.8.

## The Community

The Wastelands website has a tag-line that reads "A Different Kind of Nuclear Family"; this sums up the attitude of the administrators and the majority of the residents, in that an atmosphere of community pervades the entire region more than in most parts of Second Life.

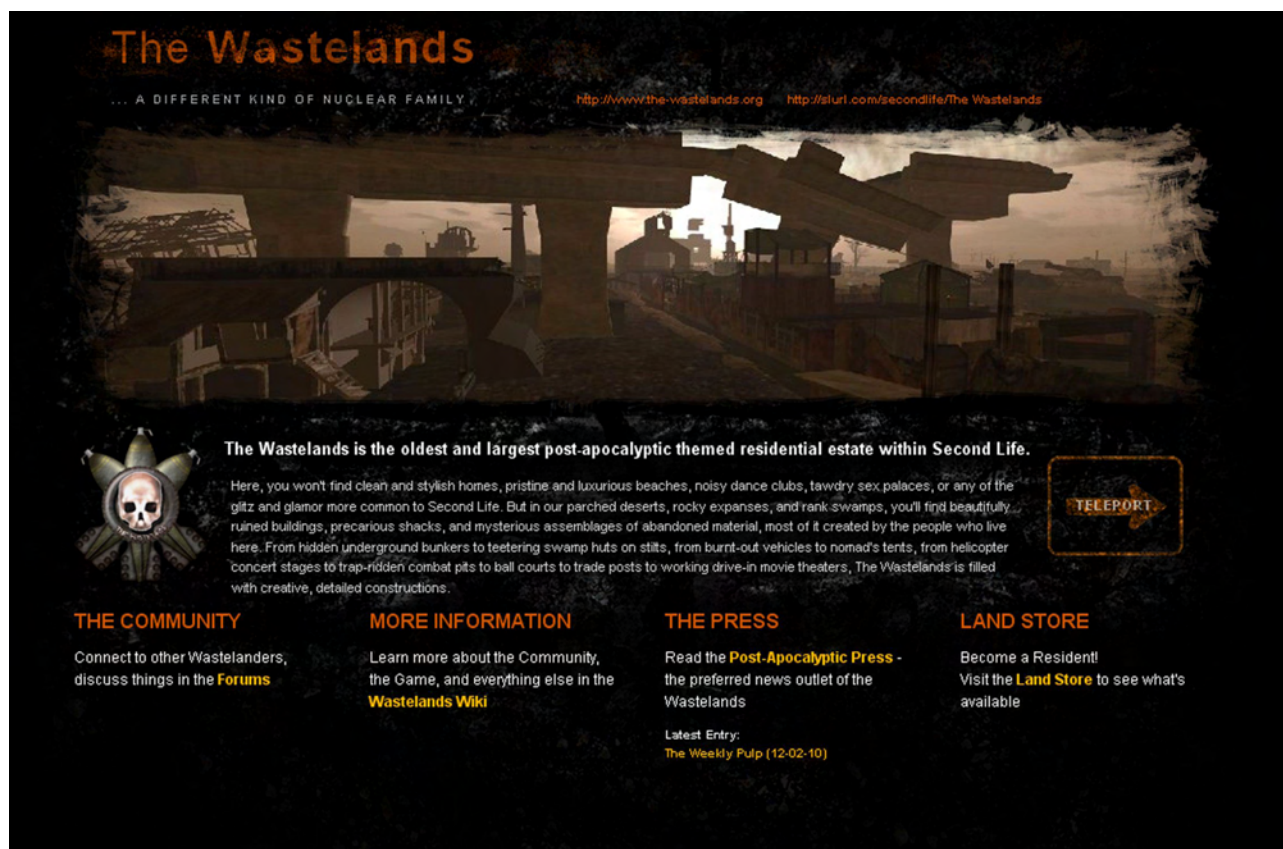


Fig.14 Homepage of The Wastelands website

The website (<http://the-wastelands.org>) features an extensive forum and wiki system as well as 'The Post-Apocalyptic Press', a news blog produced on a weekly basis (<http://press.the-wastelands.org>).

## The Wastelands Game System

The region has its own, free, combat gaming system comprising a HUD (Heads Up Display) object that a player 'wears' in-world. This enables the bespoke fighting system which allows Wastelanders to participate in Fight Night, Warzone or more free-form combat scenarios. There are also salvage machines which allow avatars wearing the HUD to combine found items into weapons, armour, or other useful items.

## Role-Play

There is an extensive role-play community in The Wastelands. This tends to resident-moderated interaction, guided by an extensive back story and a collection of clans, who are largely engaged in tribal warfare. These are roughly split into groups of humans, ghouls, mutants, manimals and botans who compete in various ways, largely involving the defence of territory.

Role-play is an opt-in activity, and not all residents participate, though many non-residents do on a regular basis. The wiki contains extensive information related to the role-playing activities that take place in WL.



## Events

The Wastelands features many regular events, some organised by the administrators (such as Fight Night and Warzone, which utilise the WL HUD gaming system) and others by the residents. Fight Night in particular is very popular; it is a tournament-system combat contest that usually takes place weekly, and regularly attracts a crowd of 30+ avatars.



**Fig.15** The crowd gathers for 'Fight Night'



**Fig.16** A post-Fight Night DJ event



Resident-driven activities, such as the DJ set featured in fig. 16, also happen on a regular basis. These usually entail Wastelanders using their own plots of land to host the activity and, as is the case with music or film, providing the audio or video streaming facility themselves (either by hosting their own server, or by paying for a commercial service). Generally these events are free to attend; the predominant model for funding is the voluntary virtual 'tip-jar'.

Other forms of events that periodically happen include live music performances (which, in terms of funding mechanics and audio stream provision, tend to work in the same way as DJ events) and a game show called 'Taunt the Mutant' which is modelled on a TV quiz show format.

From the user forums, diverse activities such as book group meetings, sandworm hunts, fishing tournaments (in Malady Bog) and desert racing events are also evident (or currently being organised).

Annually, usually on the first weekend after January 19<sup>th</sup>, the region celebrates it's birthday. The 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday event (which featured the tagline "1000 Days in The Desert") took place in 2010 and featured an entire day of events including Taunt the Mutant, numerous DJs, a double-feature of Fight Night with two live bands performing on a stage above the combat arena, and a Cabeza Muerta ('Death Head') tournament; Cabeza Muerta features in the events list less frequently, but is still a popular game based on basketball (utilising a skull as a ball).

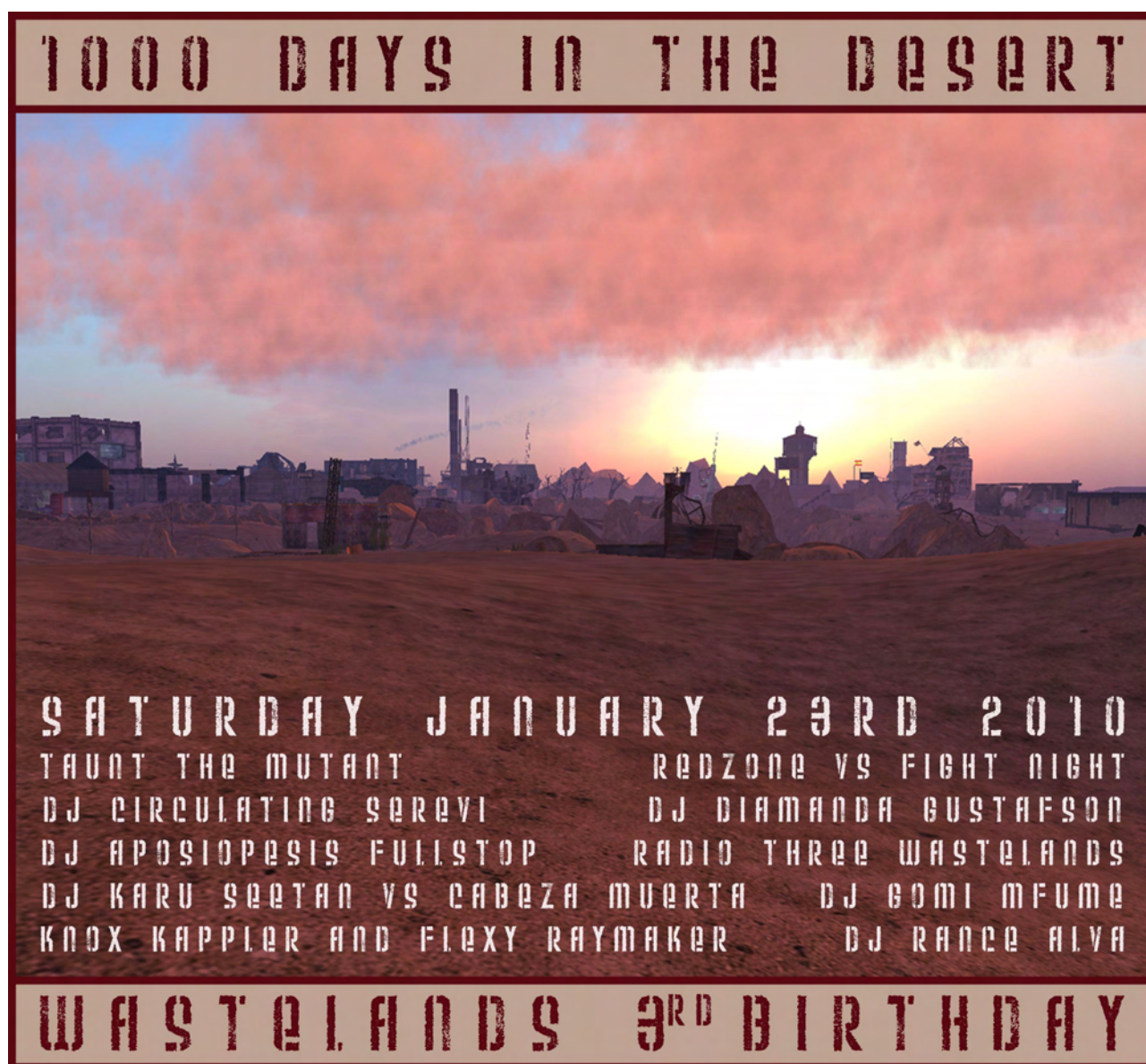


Fig.17 Poster for '1000 Days in The Desert' used both in-world and on the web



# The Survey

The survey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3FH6XMX>) was organised as follows:

## Page 1: Introduction

Page 1 contained the following introductory text:

*"Welcome to the Wastelanders Survey.*

*This is a digital anthropology project by Justin Gagen, an MSc student at University College London, designed to illuminate the topic of participation in a post-apocalyptic virtual community ('The Wastelands' collection of regions in Second Life).*

*This is an academic survey, and will be used for information only; it will NOT be used for any other purpose. Please answer all of the questions; all responses in this survey are anonymous and confidential, and IP addresses are NOT logged or collected.*

*Questions about age or gender relate to you and NOT to your avatar.*

*Queries about this survey can be directed to 'Phase Republic' in Second Life, or via [justin.gagen.10@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:justin.gagen.10@ucl.ac.uk)*

*Thanks to The Wastelands administration for cooperating with this project, and thank you for taking part."*

## Page 2: General Questions

Page 2 featured the following questions, designed to gain data related to "real world" demographics, and habits based around other PA media types.

1) How old are you? *(multiple choice/one answer)*

- under 21
- 22 to 25
- 26 to 28
- 29 to 35
- 36 to 44
- 45 to 49
- 50 or over

2) What gender are you? *(multiple choice/one answer)*

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Prefer not to say

3) Where do you currently live? *(multiple choice/one answer)*

- Africa
- Asia
- Australasia
- Europe
- North America
- South America

4) If you enjoy other forms of 'post-apocalyptic' media, please indicate what types (tick all that apply)  
(multiple choice/multiple answer)

- Film
- Animation
- Books
- Graphic novels or comics
- Music
- Video games
- Board or tabletop RP Games
- None of the above

## Page 3: Second Life Questions

Page 3 contained questions designed to gather data about the general use of SL by the respondent.

5) How many hours per week on average do you spend in Second Life? (multiple choice/one answer)

- less than 4
- 5 to 10
- 11 to 20
- 21 or more

6) What do you like or dislike about Second Life?

- FREE TEXT ANSWER

## Page 4: Wastelands Questions

Page 4 concentrated on Wastelands-specific questions, to offer some comparison with the general SL data and provide information regarding their activities in WL.

7) How many hours per week on average do you spend in The Wastelands? (multiple choice/one answer)

- less than 4
- 5 to 10
- 11 to 20
- 21 or more

8) What is usually your MAIN reason for visiting The Wastelands? (multiple choice/one answer)

- building
- driving
- events
- gaming
- role-play
- socialising
- other

9) What do you like in particular about The Wastelands?

- FREE TEXT ANSWER



# The Data

## Page 2: General Questions

**N.B.** Answers with zero (0.00%) responses removed.

### 1. How old are you? (answered question 30, skipped question 0)

Answer	Percent	Count
under 21	10.00%	3
22 to 25	20.00%	6
26 to 28	6.70%	2
29 to 35	<b>26.70%</b>	<b>8</b>
36 to 44	16.70%	5
45 to 49	13.30%	4
50 or over	6.70%	2

### 2. What gender are you? (answered question 30, skipped question 0)

Answer	Percent	Count
Female	30.00%	9
Male	<b>63.30%</b>	<b>19</b>
Prefer not to say	6.70%	2

### 3. Where do you currently live? (answered question 30, skipped question 0)

Answer	Percent	Count
Europe	43.30%	13
North America	<b>53.30%</b>	<b>16</b>
South America	3.30%	1

### 4. If you enjoy other forms of 'post-apocalyptic' media, please indicate what types (tick all that apply). (answered question 30, skipped question 0)

Answer	Percent	Count
Film	<b>93.30%</b>	<b>28</b>
Animation	63.30%	19
Books	73.30%	22
Graphic novels or comics	56.70%	17
Music	56.70%	17
Video games	76.70%	23
Board or tabletop RP Games	43.30%	13
None of the above	3.30%	1

## Page 3: Second Life Questions

1. How many hours per week on average do you spend in Second Life? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)

Answer	Percent	Count
less than 4	14.80%	4
5 to 10	18.50%	5
11 to 20	18.50%	5
21 or more	48.10%	13

2. What do you like or dislike about Second Life? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)

Respondents wrote free text; see next section ('Free Text Responses').

## Page 4: Wastelands Questions

1. How many hours per week on average do you spend in The Wastelands? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)

Answer	Percent	Count
less than 4	18.50%	5
5 to 10	33.30%	9
11 to 20	18.50%	5
21 or more	29.60%	8

2. What is usually your MAIN reason for visiting The Wastelands? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)

Answer	Percent	Count
building	25.90%	7
events	7.40%	2
gaming	7.40%	2
role-play	18.50%	5
socialising	25.90%	7
other	14.80%	4

3. What do you like in particular about The Wastelands? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)

Respondents wrote free text; see next section ('Free Text Responses').

**Total Completed Survey: 27 (90%)**



## Free Text Responses

This section consists of all free text responses to two questions, with no alterations. They are listed by respondent number. Answers consisting merely of characters with no obvious meaning have been removed.

### **Page 3, question 2: What do you like or dislike about Second Life? (answered question 27, skipped question 3, no obvious meaning to answer 2)**

1. I like the ideas of having virtual communities living under a themed environment, I hate the fact that Second Life can attract those who are socially obnoxious and cause issues with other residents and not enough is done by second life to keep them out.

2. pro: Wonderful way for creative realisation of ideas. cons: everything else.

3. filled with bots.

4. the creativity is great - the evidence of others creativity and the possibilities for your own. The way you can learn how it all works from within - classes etc is great too. When it lags, doesn't work properly, and some of the LL politics stuff is not great.

5. I love that I can meet people from all over the world that I normally could not due to time constraints and money. Second Life is a wonderful place to meet others with similar interests and where you can build a vibrant and wonderful community if you could not do so in your local area. The dislikes I could go on for days, so I would rather just focus on the positive, which is stated above.

6. love how creative the environment can be, hate how limited most of the consumerist users imagination can be.

7. I love the reality of the fantasy and meeting people from all over the world!

8. All of it

9. I dislike lag. I like The Wastelands. Of course. But seriously, I like to bring things from Second Life into my real life and visa versa.

10. Like most everything except lag.

12. I like the enormous creative potential it offers to everyone but I think it could be confused with reality. This is not a real world.

13. I like the freedom to do what interests you. The range of different things available to buy, explore and participate in. The chance to interact with others/friends that share your interests. I don't like it when there is too much lag, where you can't move or do anything, and when it makes you crash.

15. Customer Support

16. The program itself is mediocre in terms of interface and stability.

17. The ability to create content, and experience content others have created. To interact in environments not readily available in 'Real Life'

18. Cutting edge technology

19. Second Life, considered as a platform, is notoriously unstable. The program can crash, inventory can be lost and never regained, there can be untrackable sources of lag, banned people can easily return under new names, and - perhaps worst of all - sometimes it looks to YOU like you're wearing pants, but everyone else is seeing your nethers. On the other hand, everything in it is created by the people who participate. The learning curve is rather brutal, and it seems like every creation is borne of a million concessions to the limitations of the platform -- and yet, with enough effort, these things look amazing, meticulously detailed,

almost realistic, and can genuinely convey a sense of place and purpose. Socially, it also serves as a slightly more "safe" environment for getting to know others, taking risks, and getting to know yourself. There's not as much to lose by embarrassing yourself, and you know that these people are spread out around the world and have no direct relation to your real life, usually. But this social 'practice' might lead to improved real-world social skills, and the online friends are often as legitimate as companions and confidants as "real" friends. At its best, Second Life serves as a virtual artists' colony, providing support, advice, feedback, and companionship as the users learn new avenues of creative expression.

20. Certain technical issues that have always been a problem since it's inception.

21. I like being able to go places that I can't in RL, either because they don't exist, or it would be too expensive, or it would be too far to travel.

22. It's fun. Lots of people are dicks. True story

23. I Love how you can do anything and everything... twice.. from playing on a wastelands sim, to blowing up tanks on a war sim.

24. completely user created, limited only to your imagination and the amount of time you're willing to spend

25. I enjoy the creative freedom allowed in SL that you can be and do mostly whatever the hell you want. It's also a nice way to spend time with friends who are long distances, because you can convey more emotion and express yourself in a meta-verse like environment. I also believe that second life if implemented properly could possibly replace the web as we know it...it is the future

26. interacting with people

27. unstable performance

**Page 4, question 3. What do you like in particular about The Wastelands? (answered question 27, skipped question 3)**

1. I love creating a character here and living under the ethos of Wastelands. It is a great place with many creative and unusual characters.

2. The people there.

3. It's different than any other sim

4. the ethos, the theme and the characters and the builds and the underlying philosophy

5. When I came to The Wastelands and met the people there it was finally "home" for me in Second Life. The community is honestly not like any other I've ever experienced in Second Life and that speaks volumes.

6. It's the first and strongest post-apocalyptic estate on the grid. I've watched it grow and watched residents come and go. It's a constantly changing landscape with some of the most creative users on the grid.

7. The builds are incredibly detailed. Details make it more realistic

8. I'm an old wastelander, I visit from time to time now

9. I love the theme, but I really love the people. They are as important to me as friends in real life. I wish I could spend more time here, but I know my responsibilities in real life.

10. The creative builds and the apocalyptic ambience.

11. the scenery

12. the mood, the evocative atmosphere, the fantastic wastelander community

13. The freedom to role play. Meeting new people, friends and socialising. The variety of builds and



landscapes made by residents and the devs. The game of finding salvage and figuring out how to build things from what you find.

14.its awesome, strange question.

15.The Community.

16.The theme. For me, the Wastelands is SL. I don't leave the WL unless I need to buy something I cannot produce myself, such as animations.

17.It has been my home for about 3 years now. I enjoy the environment and quality of environment, the atmosphere created by user input and also the regulation of the Dev team to provide a safe and welcoming environment, but not an overbearing nannying one. I also find the inhabitants interesting and have made good friends there, which have become RL ones also.

18.Artistic freedom

19.Far too many things to put into this small box. Aesthetically, it subverts the ideals of the rest of SL in a truly wonderful way. While Second Life is often focused on perfection, glamour, easy living, and materialism, The Wastelands are dirty, broken, and difficult. But you could call it perfectly ruined - it takes meticulous effort to make things look so grungy and realistic and worn-down. It's quite a feat, in this world where you can craft a flawless sphere of perfect white with a few clicks of the mouse. Beyond that - it's an amazing community of people from around the world, all working together in this strange shared brainspace that doesn't really exist. The games are simple, yet complex, and have replay value day after day, year after year. An entire microeconomy has sprung up around the salvage and weapons! The canonical storyline is interesting and unique, and has mostly been created by the players themselves. Within that framework, so many interesting stories can be told - and the ways they interrelate unravel more with every day's interactions. Yet the roleplay is not forced - in fact, everything from land ownership to combat to roleplay is opt-in, and you can participate as much or as little as you like at any time. The Devs aren't micromanaging, or treating us like their marionettes. They just provide the scenery and the props, and some of the tools, and let us be involved in the process in whatever ways suit us best. While so much of the Wastelands has been brought to life by the residents, it's also ultimately the brainchild of just one guy - who has learned so much in SL that it is now his full-time occupation. It's a living example of what can be done by just one guy with a bold idea and the tenacity and patience to see it through and do it right. Where so many other estates and managers sputter and fail, abuse their power, or care about nothing but profit, NeoBokrug focuses on long-term stability. Also, there are tons of community-driven events, ranging from DJ sets to Movie Nights to game shows - again, all of it user-created. These heighten the sense of shared experience. I imagine that there are other estates in SL with some of these features. But I doubt that any other estate has -all- of them. All told, we're not just a ripoff of the many post-apocalyptic media already out in the world - we're something of our own devising, continuously in progress.

20.The creativity shown by the community in either roleplaying or creating an atmosphere of survival via salvage goods and materials.

21.I love the brokenness. I love that it's gritty and dirty instead of shiny and new like most of the rest of the grid.

22.most people are cool. Pretty laid back. Good times.

23.The Wastelands to me represents a world in which the worst catastrophe in the history of mankind has already happened. To be living in this post apocalyptic world would mean that you have survived, by the very definition of apocalypse, the worst that can happen. It would be the ultimate testament of the triumph of man over the world around us.

24.The Realism of it, the people, and how great it looks

25.the post-apoc enviroment

26.the builds, the people, the atmosphere

27.how big it is

## Limitations of the Study

The survey system was itself quite limiting as a basic (free) account was used. For future data collection of this type a fully-featured survey monkey account would be more appropriate, or perhaps the facilities offered by Google Docs.

If demographics had been emphasised much more data analysis could be done, though this would require a larger number of respondents to be meaningful. The small number of responses did hamper the process somewhat, though given the time constraints and a desire not to 'spam' the community, there were a reasonable number of completed surveys.

## Analysis

From the data collected a number of demographic conclusions can be reached, but the sample size is too small to consider any result to be authoritative. That being said, the results that were attained could be read as follows:

*The average Wastelander is male, North American, in the 29-35 age range, likes post-apocalyptic film and video games more than other media types, spends between 25% and 100% of their Second Life time in The Wastelands, and mainly builds or socialises.*

This general case though is too simplistic, and completely fails to reveal other facts, like a third of the female respondents spend 21 hours or more per week in WL, or that 8 out of 9 of them like PA film. As stated in 'Limitations...' above, the demographics could be analysed in much greater detail.

The information collected in relation to Second Life in general illustrated some clear likes and dislikes of the system. Popular dislikes included technical instability (a common complaint across the SL grid) and poor customer support, but the majority liked the social and creative aspects of the platform.

The question related to what respondents liked about The Wastelands was the most important of all.

When looking at this information it becomes clear that the main reasons for being in WL are related to the size of the environment (respondent #27: *"how big it is"*), the quality of the builds, the creativity and artistic freedom, the atmosphere, the other residents and regulars (respondent #24: *"The Realism of it, the people, and how great it looks"*) and, perhaps most telling thing of all, the subversion of the tools given to users by Linden Lab to create virtual environments (respondent #21: *"I love the brokenness. I love that it's gritty and dirty instead of shiny and new like most of the rest of the grid"*).

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this project was to gather qualitative information relating to WHY Wastelanders like the environment so much, and to this end the free text responses need to be taken into account over and above the demographic data.

The flavour of these seems to indicate a strong bias towards properties of environment and community, which confirms personal experience within WL.

The Wastelanders, both administrators and residents, have built a special corner of Second Life with a vibrant environment, an ongoing series of activities, and an expanding history. It deserves a much larger and more in-depth study to truly tease out it's essential characteristics.

To summarise, one respondent (#16) answered the question "What do you like in particular about The Wastelands?" with this short response:

"it's awesome, strange question".



## Further Work

One-to-one interviews would be beneficial in many cases, particularly with respondents 5, 6, 9, 13, 16, 17, 19 and 23, who have strong opinions, useful insights, or obvious history within the region.

Video and audio captures of activities would prove useful and interesting, and it was regrettable that only a limited number of events took place during the period of the study.

## Notes

1. User login statistics from <http://dwellonit.taterunino.net/sl-statistical-charts/>
2. Resident and role-player numbers were obtained from in-world group memberships.

## Useful Web-links

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3FH6XMX> – The Wastelanders survey

<http://the-wastelands.org> - The Wastelands community website

<http://forums.the-wastelands.org> - The Wastelands community forums

<http://wiki.the-wastelands.org> - The Wastelands community wiki

<http://press.the-wastelands.org> - The Post-Apocalyptic Press

<http://wiki.kokuaviewer.org/wiki/Downloads> – Imprudence SL viewer download