

Before beginning the show, I want to mention an episode we're working on about guilty pleasures. I find this topic really interesting because when it comes to fantasy and sci-fi, these genres have low brow pulp fiction roots, which has led to a long journey towards respectability. But sometimes there's a sci-fi fantasy movie or show that you love for the simple pleasure of it, even though you know, it's not a good movie or show or book. So, we'd like to hear from you. On the show's website, we posted a series of questions to answer at imaginary worlds podcast dot org slash contact. Thanks!

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, I'm Eric Molinsky.

I can't believe it's been almost a year since the pandemic hit the East Coast and we all went into lockdown. After a year, I'm starting to hit a wall. It's been a struggle to connect with people, whether it's through Zoom cocktail hours or texting friends.

My big escape this year has been playing video games – especially immersive games where I can get lost in a virtual world for hours. Also, I'm more addicted to social media than ever, but I love hearing from all of you. I feel like we've built a community around our common interests, and you've kept me company during this pandemic.

That's why I was curious to hear about another show that built a community for their listeners in the virtual world of Second Life. Yes, Second Life is still a thing people do. And as I talked about in my last episode, I've been feeling cynical about high tech lately, so I found this story inspiring because it's all about the benefits of connecting with people in a virtual world.

Daniel Peterschmidt is a producer at Science Friday, which is a show from WNYC Studios about the interaction between science and everyday life. And he is here with me now. Do, how did this all start?

DANIEL: Yeah. So, this happened back in 2007 and second life, you know, it had been around for a few years, but at like the mid 2000s that started getting really popular. *I had just started working at WNYC at the time. And I remember it was, there was no shortage of stories on second life.*

DANIEL: Yeah. And so we, we basically wanted to be in Second Life. So we could have these like kind of virtual listening parties where like our fans would make second life accounts and they would come in with their avatars and we would like sit in this big amphitheater thing and we would like live stream the radio show into second life. And

then, you know, people would light up the chat with, uh, you know, their, their kind of opinion on things or, or things they found interesting.

And so, you did a whole episode of Science Friday about checking in with your Second life community after like 12 years -- had they all been there the whole time?

DANIEL: Yeah. I mean, we left like around 2009, it just, uh, financially wasn't working, uh, working out for us. And that was kind of like the last that we knew about it. And then one day we got a tweet during our show saying a group of them were listening in Second Life and like, I sent that to the other, the rest of the staff and it's like, they're still listening in Second Life. And so I just kind of had to follow up with them. I had so many questions.

Okay, great. So, you know, before we go any further, I want to play your episode from Science Friday. So, we're going to hear Daniel take over as narrator and then, we will catch up after the episode because I have a few questions. Uh, but first, uh, here's the episode as it aired on public radio.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: One of my jobs at Science Friday is to help manage our Twitter account during the live show. And one Friday afternoon last January, we got a message from a Twitter user named Beragon. He said the show's streaming link was broken and he needed a new one so he could listen on Second Life. And I was, like, wait—Second Life?

NEWSCASTER 1: One of the fastest growing websites on the internet is a 3D world called Second Life.

NEWSCASTER 2: This is supposed to be me, kind of. It's called an avatar. And it's part of a world some people call very cool, while others consider it very weird.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Yes, that Second Life, the online virtual world that became kind of a cultural phenomenon in the early 2000s. If you've never seen Second Life, imagine a vast ocean dotted with thousands of small islands and large continents. Like Ira said earlier: Signing up is free, anyone can create an avatar, and you can really live a second life there.

You can meet other people. You can build bustling cities and blissful forests. You can make and sell things and earn real world money. Second Life really took off in the early 2000s. And it had a million regular users at its peak. But it became the butt of jokes in pop culture, the kind of thing that Dwight from The Office was into.

JIM: You playing that game again?

DWIGHT: Second Life is not a game. It is a multi-user virtual environment. It doesn't have points or scores. It doesn't have winners or losers.

JIM: Oh, it has losers.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Mean dig aside, Dwight wasn't alone in loving Second Life. A little over a decade ago, Science Friday was pretty excited about it too. So excited that we started our very own Second Life community in 2007. And then we forgot about them. But keep in mind, this was 13 years ago. No one I talked to really remembers how it started. But Ira did remember how he felt about it.

IRA FLATOW: I do remember being very excited when I heard about it.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Ira Flatow, host of Science Friday.

IRA FLATOW: The idea that you could create a whole new world and put down roots and have a spot where people could come and listen to Science Friday early on, that was crazy. I thought that was kind of cool.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: We basically wanted to throw an awesome Science Friday party in Second Life. So one day, Ira announces on the radio that we'd be streaming the show into Second Life. Anyone could log in and listen virtually with us. The thing is, we had no idea what we were doing.

We started renting an island. Side note, you can rent or buy land in Second Life and kind of do whatever you want with it. But besides a couple of trees and a pond, there was nothing on it. And no one wants to hangout with you on a barren island.

LYNN CULLENS: Science Friday was my favorite show. And eventually I volunteered to manage and build out the Science Friday island.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Luckily, Lynn Cullens, a retired mountain lion conservationist and Science Friday superfan heard our call out on the radio and volunteered to be our virtual world architect and guide. Do you remember a moment early on when you were playing it and you were like, 'Wow, this is really working for me?'

LYNN CULLENS: There were so many. The moment when I first created a primitive object in Second Life and realized that I could change this world. I wasn't just playing in it. I was creating it.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Designing an island isn't an easy task. But what Lynn created was beautiful. She built an amphitheater right on the water. And from it, every evening, you'd get this stunning view of the digital sunset. You can check out photos of it on sciencefriday.com/secondlife. The amphitheater tour had big, red, comfy-looking chairs where visiting avatars could come sit in a circle. And in the center, it was just a normal looking office chair where's Ira's avatar, Ira Flatley, would preside. Yeah, Ira Flatley, not Flatow.

IRA FLATOW: I had a lot of trouble with the Ira Flatley avatar because I could not get it to look like me. I got as close as I could to it. I'm not great at graphics.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: But not that close. This was not public radio host Ira. This was Baywatch Ira—massive biceps, 8-pack abs.

IRA FLATOW: I never had such a good body as that avatar has. So I was happy at least with that.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: So Science Friday Second Life was all set to go. We had an amphitheater; we had a beefcake Ira. What more do you really need? People of course. Lynn built it. And after some shout-outs from Ira on the radio, they came. All kinds of creatures. There was Violet Azemus, who showed up as a rabbit.

VIOLET AZEMUS: Like a realistic rabbit. As for why, I don't know. Bunnies always spoke to me.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: CB Axel, a retired paramedic, came as a human.

CB AXEL: She's younger than I am in real life. She's thinner than I am in real life.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And of course, Beragon, the person who wrote to us on Twitter. His avatar is tall and comic book muscular with long silky hair.

MATT BURR: My avatar is really handsome. I like my avatar to be hot.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: In real life, he's Matt Burr, a patent attorney with a degree in molecular biology. Usually there'd be around 70 people who'd show up every week. But at its peak, the group had a huge amount of members, over 2,800 people. There were so many people showing up that we had to set up an overflow space so the island wouldn't crash.

IRA FLATOW: Let me see if I can get one more audio question in from Second Life.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: One of the group's favorite things about the shows was being able to send their questions to Ira through the chat.

SPEAKER 1: A few billion years from now, the sun's gonna become much brighter, swell into a red giant and scorch the surface of the Earth. What we're looking at on Mercury right now, will that tell us anything about what it will be like on the Earth this time a few billion years from now?

IRA FLATOW: Wow, that's a really good question.

CB AXEL: Whenever Ira would say, "here's a question from so-and-so in Second Life," everyone would get really excited. "Yay, we're mentioned and congratulations you got your name on!"

LYNN CULLENS: It was really fun and exciting for all of us to hear. It made us feel part of the radio show.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: So during the live broadcast, Lynn moderated the chat and sent the best questions to the studio. She remembers this one time while she was moderating and there was this massive thunderstorm happening in Sacramento where she lived.

LYNN CULLENS: And at the same time, I was watching 100-year-old elm tree whip wildly about and crash through the roof at the church across the street. And I just kept typing because what was happening in my home was very different than what was happening in the studio in New York and very different from what was happening under the clear blue skies in Second Life. And that was part of the magic was being three places at once.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: But despite what a frantic job it must have been—

LYNN CULLENS: It was an experience that I looked forward to every single week. I remember a couple of times going out with Ira and walking around the island and chatting about the show. And it's one of the highlights of that relationship for me was to be able to spend that time with Ira.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Why did we leave Second Life?

IRA FLATOW: We left Second Life on a purely monetary basis. It was too expensive, to put it simply.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: It was 2009. We'd been in Second Life for roughly two years. And we'd reached a point where renting an island was just outside our nonprofit budget—roughly \$800 a month in rent. And as the executive producer of the show, Ira had to make a difficult call.

IRA FLATOW: The hardest thing was the decision to say goodbye. And that really was the hardest part of Second Life.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Because we stopped paying for the island, it disappeared. Ira and our other admins stopped logging in. And Lynn, our Second Life maestro, left Second Life entirely. And that appeared to be the final nail in the coffin. Lynn was gone. We were gone. The island was gone. The space we helped grow over two years was swiftly dismantled. Violet, one of the members of our group, says, losing communities in Second Life is pretty normal. And at some point, you just get used to it.

VIOLET AZEMUS: Personally I wish more spaces would last longer. A lot of my favorite spaces are gone now. And I miss them. I wish I could access those spaces again. But things are more transient. An interesting thing I've noticed is a prevalence of Buddhist groups in Second Life. Sort of central to Buddhism is the idea of impermanence and letting go of attachment to things. And I've always wondered how literally that can be applied to a constantly changing virtual world where things are just gone all the time.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: These vanishing virtual lands, it's a trend across all kinds of tech platforms. And when online community spaces disappear, users are often abandoned and left to fend for themselves. And that's what we thought happened to the SciFri island; just swept away with time. But it turns out our Second Life listeners decided that even though we left, they weren't done with this. So they decided to pick up the pieces and ran into some snags along the way.

MATT BURR: Yeah, here we can get into the whole soap opera, which I've been waiting to tell you actually.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: We have that story after the break.

➤ BREAK

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: When we left Second Life back in 2009, that's where we thought the story ended. It was something our longtime staff members would talk about occasionally at happy hours, that for a couple of years we did these cool, kind of kooky broadcasts from a virtual world. But then we left. But for our Second Life group, that was very much not the end of the story.

MATT BURR: Yeah, here we can get into the whole soap opera, which I've been waiting to tell you actually.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: At first, things weren't so bad. They went back to a public space where the SciFri stream was originally hosted. But that soon closed down too. After that, the group hopped from private island to private island, hosted by different members in their group who already had their own land.

But their numbers dwindled to about 20 people because being on private islands, there weekly meet-ups were now closed off to the public. Plus Ira wasn't doing shout-outs on the radio anymore. One of the members, CB Axel, sent me a screenshot from this time. It's a group of about a dozen avatars, some sitting around a glass conference table, overlooking an ocean at sunset.

Propped on top of a wooden box is a projector screen that reads "Keep Sci Friday in Second Life." The fact that the group was starting to get so small, that bothered Matt and the others. They originally joined the SciFri Second Life group because of all the people and the exciting conversations that would spring up in the chat. So they decided to do something about it.

MATT BURR: We sort of wandered the desert for a few years, basically gathering in public places.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: They decided to leave their safe private islands and head back out into public land. Matt hoped that being out in public spaces where anyone could listen in might help them recruit more people. And soon they found a public space that hosted an NPR stream that carried Science Friday.

In many ways, it seemed like the solution to their problems. But there were some downsides. Like, when anyone can join your group, "anyone" can join your group.

MATT BURR: We had no admin rights to control access to the land. So our gatherings in public spaces attracted an unsavory element of the public. It was basically two guys, just griefer and trolls and climate change deniers and wackadoos. And they would come in and provoke arguments with us and stuff like that. And they would end up dominating the conversation.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: So the griefers, which is Second Life lingo for trolls, didn't just stick to climate change denial but tackled a range of anti-science issues like anti-evolution. They would show up every Friday at their meeting place like clockwork and harass the group members.

MATT BURR: They wouldn't even necessarily wait for the topic. They would just start grieving us right off the bat, as soon as they got there. That was their whole point.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Matt and the others, they didn't ignore them. But they actually went toe to toe with them.

LYNN CULLENS: I generally do push back on things like that when I see them. But with someone like that who's doing it continuously and probably not doing it in good faith, it hits a point where you're just talking to a wall.

MATT BURR: Sometimes they would devolve into personal insults where we're calling each other stupid and "you don't know what you're talking about" and "you're just a troll." And they would not take a hint. I mean, they would show up week after week after week after week with the same routine. And they didn't listen to our complaints. So it became quickly evident that it was not being done in good faith, that they were just there to disrupt us.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And there wasn't much they could do. No one in the group had admin privileges. So they couldn't kick anybody out. And the group put up with all of this for a long time.

MATT BURR: So we actually tolerated it for years.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: How many years do you think, roughly?

MATT BURR: Five years. We put up with it for a long time because we wanted to— we had some pride in being able to listen to other points of view and to address them and so forth.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: But eventually, enough was enough.

MATT BURR: We had to get control of the situation.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: They really needed those admin privileges back. So roughly two years ago—

MATT BURR: So I did that. I created a new Science Friday group: Science Friday, the next generation.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: That's great.

They needed private land again. And luckily one of their members, CB, actually had private land and offered up part of her space where they could all meet. Now, this space is no sprawling outdoor amphitheater. It's kind of the opposite.

It's basically a game room. Homey, with lots of couches, a couple of card tables at the back. But they finally had safe haven once again. So after all the trouble they went through over the years just to listen to a show together, I was wondering was it all worth it? Matt says, basically it was because of the community.

MATT BURR: It's like walking into the Cheers bar, I guess, whenever Norm would come into the bar and everyone would go, "Norm!" Right? It's like that. It's like everyone knows your name kind of thing.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: When Matt went into Second Life over a decade ago, he wasn't expecting it would end up meaning so much to him.

MATT BURR: It kind of snuck up on me that it would become so important. I have a great family. And I have a lot of great friends. But this is just a particular idiosyncratic interest I have that I don't really have a real life community to share it with. But here, I do. And so I just don't want to lose it.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Although Matt has spent less time in Second Life than he thought he would during quarantine, it's still a valuable place for him.

If you didn't have the history that you do in Second Life, do you think your emotional well-being would be worse off right now?

MATT BURR: Yes, I definitely do. Because I have this great resource that's going to help me cope with it. It is a comfort to me to know that Second Life is right there, just a click away, if I start feeling lonely or something.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And that's something I was thinking a lot about as I was working on the story. Now, during the pandemic, a lot of us are stuck at home. Our previous social lives are in pieces. And Zoom calls aren't really ideal replacements for face to face interactions. So could Second Life and other virtual worlds give us something that endless video meetings can't?

KATHERINE ISBISTER: I remember having this moment where I felt like I might be living in the matrix where it was, like, are these people anything more than talking heads?

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Katherine Isbister is a human computer interaction and games researcher at the University of California, Santa Cruz. And like a lot of us, she spent a lot of time in the past few months on video chat.

KATHERINE ISBISTER: And then I was I was having a co-working meeting with a friend. And I could see her in the background making her tea. And it was just so comforting to see her doing that in her own space. And I think what is really interesting about shared worlds is you can go through the ritual of making tea together. You can sit quietly and just say nothing in an online world and still feel a sense of co-presence. You can get in a virtual boat and just be rowing for a while and say nothing.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Seeing the avatar's whole body, even though it's virtual, Matt says that for some reason it's actually really satisfying.

MATT BURR: I think that virtual world avatars have an unappreciated psychological power. It's especially true in a world like Second Life where you create your own avatar from scratch basically. So that avatar is an actual creative expression of yourself. You're emotionally invested in your avatar. So being in the presence of avatars triggers perfectly real emotional responses to things.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: For Celia Pearce, an associate professor of game design at Northeastern University, this checks out with the research she's done on virtual worlds. In 2015, she released the results of a demographic survey with over 800 participants that she conducted on these worlds. Who uses them, how they use them, and why? And one of the most surprising findings was that some people reported that using virtual worlds helped mitigate depression and even suicide, especially if they were disabled or trans. Support groups in the virtual world helped, but also just regular old playing; whether it was role play as different creatures, like vampires; holding events; dancing; or even people creating their own games. And unlike other games, most people using virtual worlds aren't teens. They're usually Gen-Xers or baby boomers. In the quarantine era, what does Second Life have to offer to us right now?

CELIA PEARCE: I think it offers a connection through play. In the US for instance, I think we have a little bit of Protestant work ethic baggage that really kind of marginalizes play. And I think that adults just need other forms of play besides sports that are socially

acceptable. What I'm seeing right now that's super-exciting is we're starting to see more and more of this.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: So this normalization of adult play in virtual worlds, it's helping marginalized communities with their mental health. It's allowing others to freely explore their identities. And it's helping a lot of people with loneliness. In Celia's survey, many disabled people self-reported that they use virtual worlds to mitigate loneliness. These worlds, and the play that happens inside them, give people social connection; connection that a lot of us are missing right now.

CELIA PEARCE: I think we all need to play more. And how we choose to do that is really up to our personal tastes.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: That conversation between Dwight and Jim in The Office clip I played at the beginning, that's kind of how society has looked at virtual worlds like these—as a sad waste of time. But it seems like we've made some progress since then.

And in the midst of quarantine, it looks like people are responding to this return to play.

Linden Lab has seen about a 20% increase in users that are logged into Second Life at a given time, roughly the same rise that Twitter saw with its users since the pandemic started. Now, there's about 50,000 people playing Second Life at any one time. It's clear that Second Life means a lot to people, even to someone like Lynn, who doesn't play it anymore.

LYNN CULLENS: People that play video games, especially multiplayer online games, will recognize pull of these virtual worlds. And Second Life is special in that regard.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And after a while, Lynn realized that that pull had gotten too strong for her.

LYNN CULLENS: Over time, I began to feel the loss of experiencing my other senses in the world outside.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Lynn loved Second Life. She was able to completely financially support herself in-world. But she ended up spending about 14 hours a day there for a couple of years, including weekends and holidays. And it turns out Second Life can't completely replace your first life.

LYNN CULLENS: I missed things like the scent of flowers on the breeze, the buzz of insects, the taste of a fizzy drink and not just one that looked good on a screen, the subtlety of a unique sunset instead of the same old sunset on the Science Friday island.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Lynn doesn't look back on her time there as a waste. I mean, she was experiencing real life in Second Life. She had real jobs that paid her real money. She formed real memories and had real relationships.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And as far as the Science Friday next generation group goes, they've still been meeting up every Friday, continuing a tradition that for many of them goes back 13 years.

DIANA MONTANO: Whoa. It is very weird just to see people flying around in here.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: After catching up with the members of the original Science Friday Second Life group, after learning everything they went through, I felt like it was only fitting that we had a reunion. And even though we'd abandoned them a decade ago, they were willing to host us. So Ira and myself, and a group of us from Science Friday, made Second Life accounts; learned how to put on different outfits; and slowly learned how to move around.

ALEXA LIM: What? Are we all in different rooms? I'm watching the Weather Channel in a dungeon or something. [LAUGHTER]

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Playing Second Life today is kind of like going back into a time machine. The graphics haven't really changed since the early 2000s. But trying to learn how to use it, even though it was really tricky and confusing, it was actually kind of fun.

KATHLEEN DAVIS: People are chatting me. People are chatting me being like, "hey, girl what's up?" [LAUGHTER] In the tutorial.

LAUREN YOUNG: Wow, you're so popular.

DIANA MONTANO: Nobody's chatting me.

LAUREN YOUNG: Me neither.

KATHLEEN DAVIS: It's 'cause I have a big hat on and I look like a very distinguished lady.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: I spent over two hours making my own avatar. But I didn't really like it. You know, just slicked back wet hair and torn skinny jeans. And it just looked like they were about to head to a punk concert or something. But I really dug my co-workers avatars—a mage, a werewolf, and of course Baywatch Ira.

LAUREN YOUNG: Oh my god, we're doing it. 30 minutes later, guys, and we finally are meeting up with each other.

DIANA MONTANO: I think I found y'all.

LAUREN YOUNG: Oh, I see you. Yay!

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Eventually we all teleported to CB's space. It was a Friday afternoon. And for the first time in a decade, we were all going to listen to the show together again. And things had changed. There was no more amphitheater, no more giant rising sun, just a homemade game room.

IRA FLATOW: Yeah, it seems to be people are filtering in, as we used to say. And we're not even offering hors d'oeuvres. That's the miracle of it.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: So we got there early. And as we were finding our seats, we watched as members of the original group teleport in one by one. There was Beragon, a.k.a. Matt Burr looking strong and stoic. Violet was hopping around in her realistic rabbit avatar. CB was wearing a Science Friday t-shirt that she made.

IRA FLATOW: I see Bjorlyn Loon.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: Yep. That's Lynn Cullens, Ira.

IRA FLATOW: Yeah, wow. That brings back memories.

DANIEL PETERSCHMIDT: And Lynn, who hasn't really set foot in Second Life since 2010, returned as well. As each person teleported in, the group chat sprung to life. It was just like Matt said, like walking into the bar from Cheers. And for Ira, who since this pandemic started has missed doing a live show and having live people call in, he was ecstatic to have something akin to a live audience.

Over the course of the show, hundreds of messages were sent through the group chat discussing the segments. And by the time the second hour had started, there must have been about 20 people there. And the game room felt full and alive.

IRA FLATOW: Oh, no! I'm out of the picture, I'm out of the picture!

[LAUGHTER]

DIANA MONTANO: Only in Second Life.

And I'm back with Daniel, Peter Schmidt. Um, we've, we've all been like living in virtual world pretty much for the last year. I mean, not second life, but it's felt like a virtual world and doing that story. Did, did you reflect back on sort of the virtual worlds that have helped you deal with this kind of the daily grind of the pandemic total?

DANIEL: This is not the exact same as second life, but I've just been playing a lot more video games since the pandemic started and playing online with my brothers and my cousins. Uh, we play super smash and fortnight, which is actually surprisingly fun. I had no idea.

Yeah, my D&D group, um, you know, it was getting with our busy schedules. It was getting so hard for us, all the meat. And then our gaming has been so robust, you know, over the last year. And we've been using an app called discord where you can do voice. I think you can do video as well, but, um, we've only been texting, but it's been like going back to the nineties and one of those, like multi-user dungeon games and it's been kind of amazing, and we are more in touch with each other than we've ever been, you know, wishing each other happy new year and things that we just never, you know, Merry Christmas. We just never did back beforehand.

DANIEL: Yeah. I'm sure you, uh, you feel as too, but like, you know, I find if you're just doing a straight video chat nowadays, there's like this pressure to, you know, like catch each other up on, you know, each other's lives and, you know, it's kind of like relatively heavy conversations. Like, how are you doing? I was like, well, I'm, you know, I'm sorry, I'm holding up, I'm surviving. But when you're doing these like online video game sessions with, uh, your friends and family, that the conversation gets much more casual and it feels more akin to like hanging out, even though it's still happening virtually.

So, was there anything also really fascinating that ended up on the kind of cutting room floor that you wish you could have talked about?

DANIEL: Yeah. Uh, one of the things that Sealy appears the, um, the game design researcher, uh, was talking about was how, for whatever reason, um, social

relationships are, are in a virtual world, they just accelerate the pace of those relationships just happen so much quicker. You know, even though you're not seeing their face, you may be hearing them. They were like actual voice people just get really attached to like really quickly compared to real life. And another thing she said was that like marriages happen all the time in virtual worlds, um, just like really quickly within months and that people can be married in a virtual world and then also be married in the real world to like a different spouse. And so, you know, sometimes the spouse is fine with it and sometimes they're not, but it's sort of an interesting redefining of how our social and romantic relationships can work.

You know, it was also interesting too, because I mean this whole year has really challenged, has been challenging to sort of define what exactly counts as human contact.

DANIEL: Totally. And this is something I kind of touched on the episode a little bit, but you know, all the people I've talked to from our science Friday, second life group, you know, they were typically boomers or, you know, over the of 50, which I found kind of surprising. But when I talked to Celia who had, who's been studying virtual worlds for around 20 years, she was like, yep. That is the demographics are quite different in virtual worlds compared to like world of Warcraft. Really? Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Like, you know, you, you think of like the typical gamer as like a young male, you know, griefing and trolling and all that stuff with the study she's done, um, with people who play in virtual worlds, uh, older adults are drawn to that because there's like way less emphasis on violence or, or there's no violence, there's much more emphasis on creation and socializing. And also the, the gender demographics are also flipped and it's mostly women who play in virtual worlds.

Wow. Very interesting. Well, the biggest surprise for me is that second life still exists there.

DANIEL: Yeah. They're still going. Um, and they've actually like been moving the game over to the cloud to different servers and they're still implementing all these upgrades, the game and the game financially is doing quite well. It has a private marketplace that people make and sell things through. And yeah, it's a very, it's a cashflow positive game for, for the studio to this day.

Hmm. All right. Well, thanks Daniel.

DANIEL: Thank you, Eric.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Daniel Peterschmidt and the staff at Science Friday. Next episode, we're going to explore the original cyberspace world that introduced the idea of having an avatar in a virtual world. I'm going to talk with the director of one of my favorite childhood movies, Tron.

By the way, I'm starting an advanced podcasting workshop at NYU starting March 23rd, which is separate from my beginner's class. If you're a podcaster and would like to workshop a new show or what you have so far, you can sign up at the NYU website.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

The best way to support the podcast is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. You can learn more at my newly redesigned website, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.