A Comprehensive Planning Proposal for Second Life

Second Life might have started as an idea for software that would offer access to and the ability to create in a 3D immersive space. But once launched, Second Life quickly became something more than just a software package—instead it developed into a community of people from all over the world. And this actual use of the software moved Linden Lab, the creators of Second Life, beyond the simple role of software developer to community manager.

This concept of the software developer as community manager is not altogether uncommon. In games like World of Warcraft, there are gamemasters who, when needed, manage the play. But because the intent of Second Life is to offer more of an open-ended experience rather than managed play, the community management level required has grown to reflect more of the type delivered by an actual city or other offline space where people gather.

And similar to what happens in any regular city or space where people spend time or conduct business, there comes a time when it becomes necessary to look back at the past, gather input from community members, and lay out a plan for the future. Planning literature is adamant that failure to go through this exercise and create a road map or comprehensive plan for the future risks failure of the community.

Planning the Plan
The challenge in developing a comprehensive plan for a virtual community is the lack of a model for this specific application. However, because there are many similarities between virtual spaces and offline spaces, standard comprehensive planning models can be adapted for online communities. The basic process proposed is described below:

- Conduct an internal meeting with Linden Lab to establish and adopt a planning approach.
- Choose a committee consisting of Second Life members who will be engaged and offer feedback throughout the process
- Collect data related to the history of the Second Life community. This includes trends of use, membership, demographics, and other information that helps explain how the community developed.
- Conduct community visioning exercises and surveys that are open to all members of Second Life. The products of this work would be to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the community. This process offers everyone the opportunity to help define the future including how they would like to see Second Life develop virtually, economically, and socially.
- Using the feedback from the meetings and surveys, develop short-term and long-term community goals and measurable objectives.
- Conduct a committee meeting to discuss and further develop the goals and objectives
- Conduct public meetings to hear and discuss feedback regarding goals and objectives
- Prepare a draft plan
- Conduct a committee meeting to discuss the draft plan
- Finalize the draft plan

- Conduct a public comment period on the draft plan
- Conduct a committee meeting to discuss public comments
- Prepare a second draft
- Finalize and approve the plan
- Implement and monitor the plan
- Offer and solicit annual feedback to and from community members regarding the plan, and revise the plan if necessary

The Structure of the Plan

The actual plan will address and present several aspects of the community. Such as:
- An assessment of why certain goals and objectives desired by the community have not been met, and what is in place that might or might not allow these to be met in the future.
- A concise and specific listing and prioritization of achievable goals, objectives, strategies, and actions that will move the community forward towards its chosen future. Where feasible, identify the groups/individuals who would implement specific actions.

The plan will also offer a discussion and road map for addressing:
- The balancing of competing interests
- Protection of member investments and assets
- Promotion of economic development
- Promotion of community continuity
- Inter-company and nonprofit relationships
- Life enhancement of culture, education, and recreation
- Promotion of citizen involvement
- Expectations for public and natural spaces
- Infrastructure (in this case software and hardware abilities)
- Property values
- Monitoring of the plan and future analysis

It's important to remember that a comprehensive plan should provide a consensus vision for the community, as well as specific recommendations to guide its development. Just as a comprehensive plan for a city does not define nor regulate the actual operation of a city agency, this plan does not serve as a company plan for Linden Lab. Instead as a city agency uses their plan to help guide their decisions regarding the management of the community, so can Linden Lab look to this plan as a guidance document when making decisions about managing or implementing changes to Second Life. Also, as people in a city look to a plan for assurance that their interests are acknowledged and protected, members of Second Life making decisions regarding their own investments and involvement in this 3D space can move forward with a better understanding of the vision and future of Second Life.

Across the globe, this approach has been proven to help ensure decisions of managers and stakeholders will better align with the goals and vision of a community. And for Linden Lab and all their members, this approach can lead to the enhancement, sustainability, and future success of the virtual world of Second Life.