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'Second Life' develops education following

Virtual world being used by some educators and youth groups for teaching, socialization

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Primary Topic Channel: [Virtual schooling / Distance Learning](#)

An online virtual world that has become one of the web's most popular activities is also becoming an increasingly popular venue for teaching and socialization among educators and youth organizations.

The program, called Second Life, which first opened to the public in 2003, immerses participants in a virtual world of their own making. By setting up an account (either paid or free), users are able to create a virtual persona known as an avatar, which they can personalize to look however they want.

The program, from San Francisco-based company Linden Lab, allows users to create everything within their virtual world. Users are able to buy and sell plots of land, objects they have created themselves, and so on. The world itself and its economy closely resemble that of the "first life," as some in the virtual community call everyday society.

In fact, hundreds of thousands of real dollars change hands in Second Life daily, and it would have an annual gross domestic product of around \$150 million if it were to stop growing today.

Whatever Second Life is, it's clear that it belongs in a different class than the virtual realities of film and fiction that have gone before it. The closest comparison would be to online video games such as "World of Warcraft" or "The Sims Online." Users download free software that opens a portal to Second Life, and Linden Lab's servers draft models of the ever-changing world and send it back to users as a real-time video. The difference is, Second Life is not a game. It doesn't have a goal, and most resources aren't restricted. Characters can fly or breathe water, and they never age or die.

With the popularity of Second Life soaring (more than 1.2 million people have joined throughout the world), it was only natural that educators would take notice of the phenomenon and begin exploring the possibilities of turning it into an educational tool.

Linden Lab has been encouraging educators to take advantage of the multimedia and social-networking possibilities within its program. A year ago, an eMail list was started for educators interested in using Second Life. Within the year, the list has grown to more than 700 educators around the world. In addition, Linden Lab offers the purchase of private islands at discounted rates to educators and nonprofit organizations. If educators want to test out Second Life for a class, Linden Lab will even offer them a free piece of land for the duration of the class. Small private islands are sold for \$980, as well as a monthly land fee of \$150.

A main draw for educators in using Second Life is the improvement in interaction and expression when compared with programs such as distance-education courses. "I think that is one of the things that's so attractive to educators using

Second Life," says Linden Lab community developer Claudia L'Amoreaux, or Claudia Linden as she is known within Second Life. "The quality of interaction is hard to even describe. It doesn't replace face to face, but it does enable working with people all over the world."

Despite Second Life's immense popularity, the appropriateness of its content for students is an issue. As with the web itself, there is a range of seedy activity available to users: Gambling, stripping, and virtual prostitution are easy to find if you look for them. Partially because of that, Linden Lab has set up a teen version of the world, known as Teen Second Life.

Teen Second Life, or TSL, is arranged in the same fashion as the adult version, although there is only PG-rated material available in it. The world is restricted to teens ages 13-17, and all adults other than Linden Lab employees are banned from entering the main island in the world.

In recent months, Linden Lab has begun to promote TSL's educational value. Private islands have been set up as the only place where educators can set foot if they decide to participate in the program. The privacy of the island is left up to the educator or organization purchasing the island. Users can choose whether they'd like the island to be limited to students in their class or program, or as in the case of the New York-based youth development organization Global Kids open to any teen using Teen Second Life, giving teens the opportunity to explore and participate in group projects.

Shortly after announcing a \$50 million initiative on digital media and learning in October (see story: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStory.cfm?ArticleID=6654>), the MacArthur Foundation gave a grant to Global Kids as part of its goal to study the possibilities of a new learning environment within virtual worlds. With the grant, Global Kids proceeded to create the first public island within the Teen Second Life world.

What Global Kids is doing is quite rare within Second Life, says Barry Joseph, director of the online leadership program with Global Kids: "The one process that is common now is bringing your own teens into the space, which means you're working with teens who don't know that environment and training them in person. We are working with teen residents who are already there, the natives to that space, and creating programs for them."

What attracts educators to Second Life is its openness. While other programs, such as the Sims, have set goals and built a closed environment, Second Life is built from the ground up by its million-plus users. Every single object, building, character, and vehicle has been designed by someone within the virtual world. This ability to create extends into the educational part of the world.

In the real world, "when we meet with our students, we bring them into a classroom or computer lab, give them some paper and objects, and see them the same time the following week," says Joseph. "In Second Life, the Global Kids space never closes. Our workspace is their play space. Not only are they there, but they're also building everything there. They're building things they want to see in the program themselves."

Many colleges have begun to incorporate Second Life into some of their courses' curriculum, and some have held entire classes based in the virtual environment. At Seton Hall University, students taking Danielle Mirliss's Industrial and Organizational Psychology course this fall were able to use Second Life as part of a virtual team-building exercise. In it, students were given a cover story in which they were working for a public-relations firm that was building a piece on the best places and people in the Second Life world. The class spent two hours completing a structured scavenger hunt within Second Life, followed by completing a wiki and a survey.

Bradley University is one of the first colleges to adopt a course taught almost entirely in the realm of Second Life. Ed Lamoureux, associate professor in the Multimedia Program and Department of Communications at Bradley, has put together a course entitled Field Research in Second Life, which is to be taught during the school's winter term in January with a possible repeat in May. The course aims to teach real-world field research, adapt field research techniques, examine the potential of large and immersive online communities as teaching and learning environments, and expose students to this large world that has many purposes other than just gaming.

Eight students will take the one-hour-per-day course from the comfort of their home or dorm room. Each class will

take place in a conference location on a virtual campus put together by the New Media Consortium, an international consortium of more than 200 colleges, universities, museums, and other learning-focused organizations, and these classes will consist of a lecture that is either live or recorded, a question-and-answer period, and student reports on their field research from the previous day.

"I've been opposed to teaching games directly, as I'm uninterested in shooting, killing, and fantasy," says Lamoureux. "But Second Life presents us with a wonderful opportunity to learn and teach about virtual environments for living and learning. [It] helps keeps me engaged and relevant to our students."

One of the more interesting uses of the main grid of Second Life is taking place at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Chattanooga. "I became aware of Second Life last April," says Larry Miller, the school's director of Continuing Medical Education. "I was impressed with two things□this is a very cool-looking environment that would be appealing to digitally savvy young people, and this world was one that allowed for rich human interaction through the use of avatars."

As a result, the school is planning to use Second Life in several ways. Continuing Medical Education activities have been planned in which physician participants, through their avatars, will have the opportunity to see lab work and vital signs of the virtual patient avatars in Second Life. They'll also be able to ask questions related to patient behavior and risk factors. After gathering the patient data, the physicians will use web resources for treatments. Miller hopes that clever scripting might eventually allow for avatars to reflect better conditioning through exercise done in the real world.

The school also is looking into using the social networking within Second Life to establish patient support groups for cancer patients and their families. Families of the patients would be able to produce simple digital story productions that would then be shared throughout Second Life.

Many obstacles can be overcome within the Second Life world, says Joseph. "Second Life can offer the experience of what it is like to not only move beyond one's physical limitations, such as chronic pain or being confined to a wheelchair, but beyond the rules of physics, like flying. It also connects those who might otherwise be socially isolated due to illness," he explained. "This involvement can then give teens the confidence they need offline to fight their daily challenges."

There are some limitations, though, on who can be a part of the two virtual worlds□especially that of the teen grid.

"Certain demographics are already there," says Joseph. "You will need to have a relatively new computer and broadband access. Also, even though it's free to get in Teen Second Life, you will still need a credit card to register. That's one of the ways [Linden Lab] can manage and maintain a youth-only space, but it makes registering a challenge for teens internationally."

While Second Life has taken off among some educators, it's unclear where it will be headed in the future. "Second Life has great potential," says Miller. "Most educators who see it will struggle with exactly how to use it, but I don't think that anyone denies the power of the experience for learning."

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Links:

Second Life

<http://secondlife.com>

Linden Lab

<http://lindenlab.com>

Global Kids

<http://www.globalkids.org>

Seton Hall University

<http://www.shu.edu>

Bradley University
<http://www.bradley.edu>

New Media Consortium
<http://nmc.org>

University of Tennessee College of Medicine
<http://www.utmem.edu/Medicine>

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