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Making the MUVE to virtual education

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Making the MUVE



to Virtual Education

INTRODUCTION

Second Life, a 3D multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), is becoming an increasingly popular topic at educational technology conferences and in the media these days. What's all the fuss about?

Imagine entering a virtual environment with a few simple clicks of the mouse, to meet colleagues from all over the world, hold discussions, attend and present lectures or lessons, view media, and exchange ideas as well as materials. Imagine learning which new technologies hold the most promise, and how educators are implementing them in their schools. Imagine having access to a network of educators who are dedicated to formulating best practices in using technology to enhance learning. Imagine forming professional relationships with these colleagues in a virtual world that can transform into real life friendships. All this is literally available at one's fingertips without leaving the comfort of home, school, office, or favorite Internet cafe.

Second Life is a virtual, immersive world in which members, known as residents, not only interact but also create original content. Registration is free, although there are expanded privileges for paying members, and special software (the Second Life "client") needs to be downloaded. As part of the registration process, residents create online identities represented by avatars.

Educators around the world have been exploring Second Life and its uses in education for some time – professional development organizations like ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) and Discovery Educators Network have a presence inworld, as do an increasing number of universities, libraries and other educational institutions. Individual educators are also setting up shop to share ideas and to create inworld resource centers.

There are many reasons to try Second Life. This article focuses on ways in which educators engage in the environment, including:

- Expanding one's professional network
- Innovating and exploring
- Professional growth
- Developing leadership skills
- Having fun!

EXPAND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

A virtual environment like Second Life can be a powerful social network for educators. One of the pleasures of spending time in Second Life is the serendipity of meeting new and interesting people. Education areas, like ISTE Island, Discovery Educators Network (DEN), and New Media Consortium (NMC) offer educators places to explore, create, and learn together. Community is built around interests and a willingness to share and learn together – as Marianne Malmstrom, aka KnowClue Kidd, likes to say, "Second Life is a virtual brain trust." One of its great strengths is that interactions regularly occur across a variety of ages, institutions, and cultures.

For example, Susan Toth-Cohen (Zsuzsa Tomsen) met a fellow educator from the University of Plymouth in Devon, England in a chance encounter at a Second Life mall. They began a conversation that eventually led to a collaborative project, the Sexual Health SIM described at: <http://sl-sexualhealth.org.uk>. These happy accidents occur frequently in Second Life; people come together to discuss and create new venues for education, opportunities across time and space that are less likely to occur outside of Second Life, if at all.

Educational organizations help facilitate these connections. Jennifer Ragan-Fore, the project director for ISTE's Second Life Program, notes that "The unique opportunity for membership-based organizations like ISTE and our Affiliates is the potential that Second Life offers



ISTE headquarters in Second Life

for deepening our infrequent face-to-face encounters with regular, real-time conversations, projects, and relationship-building. Our annual NECC conference offers important opportunities for members to network and connect with

fielding private questions, maintaining complete transcripts of presentations and questions afterwards to use for assessment and follow-up, and opportunities to create and build resources together in real time or over time. Second



Life is ideal for creating simulation projects and role playing. Participants are not bound to “brick & mortar” space; groups can travel to virtual locations and experience full sized 3D models of tsunamis, visit a holodeck for a virtual field trip around the world, or simply fly back in the time and explore the Renaissance. Try doing that at a conference or classroom in “real life!”

Second Life truly promotes active engagement and learning by doing and interacting with others. An unexpected advantage of being involved in Second Life as a MUVE (similar in some ways to WoW www.worldofwarcraft.com and Sims <http://thesims.ea.com/us>) is that it raises one’s “cool factor” with students. It also serves to give teachers perspective into the experiences of children and young adults who are sometimes called “digital natives.”

other educators, and our Second Life project provides the regular care and feeding needed to keep those relationships going strong year round.”

These include a better command of chat shorthand and a deeper understanding of the power of social networks. In addition, becoming more conversant in virtual worlds has the effect of leveling the playing field and may help students see teachers more as partners in their learning, and not adults who completely lack insight into their worlds (Second Life is available for adults age 18 and older; the Second Life Teen Grid is a community for 13 – 17 year olds).

INNOVATE AND EXPLORE

Second Life provides educators with new ways to learn and teach. Everyday tasks are transformed and become more fun. For example, presenters can lecture, show and discuss slide shows, video and audio clips and distribute handouts in ways similar to real life conferences and courses. Second Life facilitates interactions with one’s audience and students through instantaneous communication using text or voice, sharing Internet links,

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Second Life provides many of the same venues for growing professionally that real life (RL) affords. This includes

“...becoming more conversant in virtual worlds has the effect of leveling the playing field and may help students see teachers more as partners in their learning, and not adults who completely lack insight into their worlds...”

presenting at conferences as described above, attending seminars and professional development workshops, working on collaborative projects, and conducting special events such as a virtual backpack safety awareness campaign led by Susan Toth-Cohen and collaborating on publications such as this article.

In addition, Second Life helps teachers build 21st-Century skills by allowing them to explore new ideas and practices among colleagues in a supportive, cross-cultural arena.

Conferences and presentations bring colleagues together from around the world. For example, “Second Life Best Practices in Education,” an international conference, was held in May 2007 across a number of different sites inworld. 1300 educators from all over the globe attended the event to hear keynote/academic presentations, attend exhibits, participate in social events, and meet vendors from RL (real life) and SL (Second Life). Other

educational organizations, like ISTE, offer regular series of presentations and learning activities for continuing professional development.

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Multi-User Virtual Environments are here to stay, that much is certain. Their role in education is rapidly evolving. Second Life has attracted the attention of K-20 educators who are using it for professional development (e.g., Kathy Schrock’s Lighthouse Learning Island: <http://nausetschools.org/lighthouselearning>) as well as day-to-day classes (e.g., Beth Ritter-Guth’s work: <http://collegeenglish.wikispaces.com/SecondLife>), not to mention social networking (<http://www.iste.org/secondlife>). Other educators have taken on leadership roles by teaching skills to colleagues, helping them build and create learning, and volunteering to share their expertise in other ways.



Lounge area at headquarters



Educators can take advantage of scheduled activities, but it's also fun to explore on one's own: hang glide, surf, skate, fly around, play games, and explore. On Genome Island, visitors can interact with a 3D cell. Travel to various parts of the globe - visit a virtual reality room (VRR) and click to the top of the Eiffel Tower and try out your French. Visit Tokyo, ancient Rome, explore oceans and the cosmos. Create something special - become a better teacher by revisiting the role of learner! Second Life is the perfect place to do just that.

CONCLUSION

Second Life has tremendous potential for educators. There is a learning curve to be sure, particularly for those who are new to virtual environments. A number of online tutorials and other resources are available to help newbies get started and learn more about how Second Life can enhance education. Once inworld, educators can find colleagues who are willing to help provide more of an orientation. ISTE in Second Life is a great place to start: <http://slurl.com/secondlife/ISTE%20Island/93/83/30>.

KittyGloom Cassidy (Jennifer Ragan-Fore, Director, ISTE General Membership Program) having fun in the virtual snow

Educators who learn about this environment continue to build their credentials as technology leaders and can help champion its use, or at the very least, become a school or district expert on its strengths and limitations.

HAVE FUN!

Second Life provides new ways for educators to have fun by learning new things. Activities include developing skills to create virtual objects ("building") and writing programs to make objects interactive ("scripting"). There are many educational sites to see and interact with, as well as cultural events such as concerts and museums. Moreover, the prospect of sharing these new experiences with peers and students and capitalizing on them to create learning activities that are both fun and educational adds an extra dimension to the enjoyment. For example, every other Sunday one of ISTE's docents, Esme Quanha, guides educators on tours to interesting places all over Second Life.

Enter a 3D environment and suddenly colleagues are face to face with visual representations of the people with whom they are communicating and interacting in a space that allows for shared experiences. It seems far more



ISTE sponsors "movie night" showing Machinima created by members at a drive-in movie setting

engaging to talk with a colleague “avatar to avatar” instead of just reading text, viewing video stream, or hearing their voices. Interacting in a common environment can feel more engaging and draw participants deeper into the experience.

There is something enticing about interacting with others in environments that appear to be both familiar and, at the same time, extraordinary.

LEARN MORE

Listed below are additional resources for learning about Second Life and education (These are available online at NJAET as links):

Educational Uses of Second Life Video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOFU9oUF2HA>

Educational Uses of Second Life Wiki:

<http://slededucation.wikispaces.com/educationaluses>

Global Kids Online Leadership Program:

www.globalkids.org

Lighthouse Learning Island:

<http://nausetschools.org/lighthouselearning/index.htm>

Literature Alive! In Second Life:

<http://literaturealive.blogspot.com>

Literature, Pedagogy and Second Life:

<http://nicosiapedagogy.blogspot.com>

Scott's Second Life:

<http://scottsecondlife.blogspot.com>

Second Life educators list:

<https://lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educators>

Second Life Education Wiki:

http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki

Second Life Education Wiki - Working with Teens:

www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life:_Educators_Working_with_Teens

SLED Picayune:

<http://sledpicayune.blogspot.com>

Sloan-C SL Net:

<http://sloancslnet.ning.com>

Story of My “Second Life”:

www.storyofmysecondlife.com

Suffern Middle School in Second Life:

<http://ramapoislands.edublogs.org>

Taking Your First Steps in Second Life

By Kevin Jarrett

Ok! So you're ready to take the plunge and try Second Life out for yourself. Terrific! It's easy to get started.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN: Check the system requirements (<http://secondlife.com/corporate/sysreqs.php>) to determine if your machine is up to snuff. Second Life needs a fairly modern computer and reasonably powerful graphics card to run smoothly. If you're unfamiliar with these technical terms, find someone who is and get their help. Second Life will work on older, less capable machines but the experience will be much less enjoyable. Don't worry, if you have a machine less than two years old that has a dedicated graphics card (in other words, the system doesn't have “integrated graphics” or “motherboard graphics”) or if there's any reference to ATI or NVidia chipsets in your system specs, chances are you're okay. If you or your kids play ANY fairly recent games on the computer (especially 3D games) you'll be fine.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? Ok, you've found your way to www.secondlife.com and pressed 'Sign Up.' You now have to choose a name for your avatar. You can have any first name you want but your last name must be among the choices provided. **IMPORTANT:** this can't be changed, and although you may create more than one account (called 'alts' for 'alternate' avatars), you'll want to choose your name wisely. Pick a first name you are comfortable being addressed with. Case in point: my first avatar is named “Digital Mincemeat.” I quickly grew tired of being called “Digital” and created my second and current avatar, “KJ Hax.”

CHOOSE A LOOK AND ENTER YOUR ACCOUNT DETAILS. You'll be presented with a series of choices for your basic appearance. Don't worry, you can change everything - **AND WE MEAN EVERYTHING** - later. Just pick one and go. Fill out the rest of the form. Yes, your real life credentials are required! Don't bother with choosing the 'Premium' (for pay) account option, you can always do that later.

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Getting Started in Second Life:

Second Life for Dummies by Sarah “Intellagirl Tully” Robbins and Mark “Typewriter Tackleberry” Bell (2008), Wiley Publishing: Hoboken, NJ.

Torely Linden’s Video Tutorials: www.youtube.com/user/Torley

Future of 3-D Worlds: <http://metaverseroadmap.org>



Backpack Safety Awareness Event



A building class in Second Life

Taking your first steps continued....

YOU’VE GOT MAIL! Check your email for an activation message, click the link, then download the software. Install it, log in with your avatar name (first & last) and the password you chose. When prompted, try to choose an orientation location OTHER THAN a regular Linden Lab “Orientation Island.” My personal favorite: Ben & Jerry’s! You’ll find fewer people at these custom-branded orientations and will be less likely to encounter people who, sadly, think it is fun to tease “newbies” as they show up for the first time in Second Life. It happens - just ask Kathy Schrock!

GET THEE TO ISTE! As soon as you complete the orientation, use the SEARCH feature (be sure you’re on the ‘Places’ tab) to locate ISTE Island. Teleport over! (You can also click this link: <http://tinyurl.com/yud38g>.) You may find some avatars there to converse about the eDocent schedule (on an easel board near the front desk). You’ll be able to see when you can expect to come back and find an ISTE volunteer who will be happy to assist you with everything from the basics (sitting, walking, flying) to finding free items, customizing your appearance and finding cool educational places to visit. Feel free to wander around the island and explore. Set a landmark so you can return easily (click the ‘World’ menu at the top, then, ‘Create Landmark Here.’).

You’re on your way! All you need to do now is join ISTE in Second Life (it’s free, just search using the ‘Groups’ tab and press *Join for \$0*). Then you’ll get notices of upcoming events and more.

See you in Second Life!

