



The School of Second Life

by Wagner James Au

Creating new avenues of pedagogy in a virtual world.

For those who grew up on computer and video games over the past thirty years, it's no surprise that games have become a full-fledged educational tool, merging play with learning in a way that speaks to the digital generation's technical literacy. Adding heft to this development, the Federation of American Scientists recently published the results of a year-long study suggesting that games have the power to teach analytical skills, team building, and problem solving on the fly.

Among the most powerful platforms for game-based teaching is Second Life, a virtual world superficially similar to online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Sims Online* but embedded with numerous features that can make it an ideal pedagogical resource.

If you've ever seen video games like *Tomb Raider* or *Grand Theft Auto*, with their third-person, over-the-shoulder view of the action, you get the visual appearance of Second Life. Using mouse and keyboard, players (or Residents, in the SL lingo) maneuver their stylized avatars, or alter egos, through a lush three-dimensional landscape of forests, mountains, and plains, typing chat messages to other users, and interacting with them at parties, events, and so on. Unlike online games, however, Second Life is entirely user created. That is, Residents literally build the world together with the 3-D construction and programming tools provided for them, a process that resembles a group session of Lego building, except that it's done with people logging in from anywhere in the world.

Linden Lab, the company behind Second Life, maintains a policy whereby Residents retain the IP rights to their creations, enabling businesses, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions to re-create their assets without fear of losing control over them. As of October 2006, the total subscriber base is well over 1 million and, at current growth rates, is expected to triple by next October.

For many, the ability to look over the shoulder of one's virtual self unlocks a realm where anything seems possible, and they're happy to treat this world as a risk-free platform for lucid dreaming, crafting a collectively experienced, collectively told narrative of conflict, adventure, and exploration. This is the play aspect many educators find appealing about Second Life, where learning becomes a fun challenge to be enjoyed in a group setting.

Even from that brief description, the educational applications should be obvious. The ability to build 3-D objects collaboratively and in real time with others in the same world has enormous potential for teaching building, design, and art principles. Because Second Life is a rough simulation of the natural world, with meteorological and gravitational systems, the possibilities of experimenting with natural and physical sciences are endless. Meanwhile, the ability to interact with people from all over the globe enables political and cultural exchange and research in a safe and controlled environment.

The game received considerable press lately when the Reuters news agency opened an all-digital bureau within the environment, becoming just the latest real-world organization to recognize the significance of the space. Several architecture schools, the federal National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Harvard Law School's Berkman Center, and the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Public Diplomacy are among the many institutions already using Second Life for similar reasons.

Similar potential exists in Teen Second Life (often called TSL, or the Teen Grid), a separate and smaller version of SL

that's restricted to youths ages 13–17 (and to select adults, after a background check conducted by Linden Lab). Several educational projects have already set up shop there. One of them is sponsored by Global Kids, a New York–based nonprofit organization that teaches leadership, citizenship, and learning skills to urban youth.

"While we have used the Internet before as a place to extend our work, for example through online discussions," Barry Joseph of Global Kids explains, "Teen Second Life has offered us the first place online where we can bring the entirety of our youth–development curriculum, without cutting corners, and then take it in new directions."

One of those directions involved a virtual summer camp on a private island in TSL, where fifteen teens from three countries participated in an interactive, experiential workshop learning about global issues such as economic inequality and the genocide in Darfur. Joseph sees even more educational applications beyond this experience, derived from the existing culture of users.

"Being in Second Life is inherently a leadership opportunity, as there is nothing to do there unless you create your own activities," he says. "Every week, teens stumble upon Global Kids Island and then propose elaborate plans for activities they can create all on their own, such as dance parties, word games, and holiday events. Imagine what can happen when these budding leaders are given more substantive missions, educational content, and adult mentoring."

Kids Connect is another TSL project, in which youths in New York and Amsterdam collaborate on building a hybrid city. "None of our students had ever done any kind of 3–D modeling before," says project leader Josephine Dorado. "When they first started, there were the usual awkward moments of getting acquainted with 3–D space. 'Keisha,' a thirteen–year–old girl, was having a tough time the first few days, but by the end of the second week she felt confident enough to lean over and tell 'James,' the student next to her, that the house he was building was crooked. 'That ain't even!' she declared with just one glance at his house. What surprised me was how quickly 'Keisha's' learning had accelerated since the first day, and how the students' skills regarding spatial patterning had evened out, transcending any kind of supposed gender differences."

Still, Global Kids's Barry Joseph advises caution for educators interested in this space. "In 1996, not every company needed to be on the Web," he says. "Ten years later, not every educator needs to be in SL. Working with youth in TSL is on the cutting edges of progressive pedagogy, so you might want to wait before getting involved if you aren't willing to lose a little blood along the way."

"To truly optimize the experience, you may want to require that students collaborate in building something so they learn how to communicate and can see how a different point of view can affect their creative processes," adds Dorado. "For example, 'Keisha' from New York gets paired up with 'Willem' from Amsterdam, and they have to figure out how to build a bridge together."

The best way of experimenting with Second Life's educational potential, of course, is trying it out. Curious teachers should play with SL in the mature grid, then move on to creating pedagogical resources that could be rebuilt in Teen Second Life (pending Linden Lab's approval, of course.) "Plan on building whatever you need once you get on the teen grid, since the Linden iron curtain between the teen grid and the adult grid doesn't allow for easy transfers of inventory," Josephine Dorado notes.

Accounts are free; go to the Second Life Web site, choose a Resident name for yourself, and download and install the software. Make sure you have the technical prerequisites — primarily a broadband Internet connection and a powerful 3–D graphics card — and, more important, start with a list of Residents to talk with and educational sites to visit once you're there.

The best place to find both is at the official site's educational page and through the Second Life Education Wiki, a compendium of resources, contacts, and educational sites to visit once you've entered the world. Also, you can subscribe to several email lists of interest. Educators, and those working specifically with students ages 13–17, can also contact Linden Lab to discuss teaching projects in Teen Second Life.

Global Kids's repository of TSL experiences, diaries, and best–practices guides is available at Global Kids' Digital Media Initiative.

Wagner James Au is an "embedded journalist" who has chronicled Second Life for three and a half years on his blog, *New World Notes*.

The following Web sites appeared in this article:

Global Kids: www.globalkids.org

Second Life Web site: www.secondlife.com

educational page: secondlife.com/education

Second Life Education Wiki: www.simteach.com

email lists: <https://lists.secondlife.com>

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

ages 13–17: <https://lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educatorsandteens>

Global Kids' Digital Media Initiative: www.holymeatballs.org

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