

Living in the World You Imagine

by Angela Balcita

Here's a secret: I have always wanted long legs, purple hair, and the ability to fly. Until recently, I had given up on these aspirations. But as a new member of an online society, I can redesign myself, even if it's in a world that exists only on my computer.

Welcome to Second Life, a 3-D virtual world created by San Francisco-based Linden Lab, where "residents" from all over the globe can create online personas called avatars, connect with other residents, and move through a virtual landscape any way they please. With over 5 million residents to date and over \$1 million being exchanged daily, Second Life is also a multimillion dollar business. Residents can buy and sell their virtual real estate and other in-world creations with Linden dollars that translate to actual real-world currency. A world that prides itself on being shaped completely by its users, the main grid of Second Life is reserved for ages 18 and older. But Teen Second Life (TSL) allows those under 18 to have a hand in developing their own corner of the virtual world.

While I was drawn in by the way I could create my persona according to my own preferences and fly gracefully through

the cyber world, I have to admit that I was leery. Growing up in the '80s, I didn't have the Internet. If I wanted to meet new people, I actually had to walk out of my house and talk to other humans face-to-face. At a time when teens have a variety of online social networking outlets, I was eager to see how TSL was different.

The first thing I learned was that when they say Teen Second Life, they mean ages 13 to 17. And they're not kidding. Even for an adult reporter like me writing a story about Second Life for a teen magazine, TSL is a virtual Fort Knox. Despite approval from the TSL Community Manager, a full background check, and my pledge to uphold the community standards, I was informed that the closest I could come to TSL was to visit two islands owned by real-world organizations that teens and TSL-approved adults worked together to create. I teleported there immediately.

An Eye for Creativity

I am moving my avatar, Imagina Writer, through a vast space under an endless sky. I am on the Eye4You Alliance Island, a lonely place that has little in the way of development: a model of a miniature city, a few billboards, a half-constructed building. I think I'm alone when a large egg-

shaped creature descends from out of nowhere. He is wearing a top hat and a monocle.

"Hi Imagina," appears in my chat box.

"Hello," I type. Communication on Second Life is currently done via Instant Messenger although there have been rumors that a voice feature will soon be added.

His screen name, Jay Closterman, is posted above his head, and after we exchange pleasantries, I learn that the egg is a teen and an active volunteer here on the Eye4You Alliance Island. His looks are his own creation. "I wanted to look somewhat like Humpty Dumpty," Closterman explains. When I ask if I can interview him, he kindly obliges. "I can get out some chairs, if you like," he says, before two slim, shiny silver chairs magically appear before us.

Launched in October 2006, the Eye4You Alliance Island is a partnership between the Alliance Library System in East Peoria, Illinois, and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in Charlotte, North Carolina. According to Kelly Czarnecki (screen name Saryn Fanwood), an adult co-leader at Eye4You, the island was created to take the idea of a library beyond the stuffy buildings most teens are used to.

"While we have involvement from adults that are not just librarians, we



wanted to have a space that teens and adults could work together on to redefine learning, libraries, and community,” she says. Soon, the island will have educational services, libraries, and other resources and programs teen residents will create. But for now, it’s very much in construction, relying on volunteers like Closterman for support and development. Recently, Closterman assisted with a class that taught teens how to make in-world creations. “This class was on how to make a chair. Each student tried building a chair in-world,” he says. “The chair you’re sitting on is the chair I made for my example.”

In addition to teaching, Closterman uses his skills to contribute to Second Life’s booming economy. Where else can a teenager create and sell furniture and pre-made buildings in his own store called Jaymart?

Developing their own classes, buildings, and businesses is one of the things that draws residents to an island like Eye4You. It’s one of the reasons a teen with the screen name Sean Marsi sticks around.

Marsi has shaggy black hair, a blazer, and flared jeans. He is another active teen volunteer. “I teach building and host events such as game shows, games, and classes.” He first heard of Second Life on an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) list. While Second Life is similar to these MMORPGs

in their interface and display, Second Life differs in its emphasis on ownership and creativity. These residents are encouraged to design not only their own avatars but also the world around them, and to take ownership of the things they create. Additionally, unlike video games, “playing” Second Life doesn’t necessarily involve meeting a goal, reaching another level, or attaining a particular objective. Rather, the idea is simply to take advantage of the opportunities of living in a virtual world.

Sticking to Second Life’s tagline, “Your World. Your Imagination,” teens are in charge of making this space into whatever they want, using the adults primarily for guidance. Even on an island in TSL where teens know there is usually a TSL-approved adult present, Czarnecki has to make sure she lets these teens control what the island will become.

“It is not always easy for adults (including myself) to not want to take over and control everything. We have to learn when we need to do this, but, much more, we need to step back and listen to the teens to create opportunities for them,” she says. “This is a space for teens and we need to respect that.”

Changing the (Virtual) World

Teen power is alive and well on another island owned by Global Kids, a real-life New York-based organization that launched an online presence in 2006.

Dedicated to helping teens develop leadership skills and an awareness for global issues, Global Kids invites teens to create a world where they can address current topics in a way that’s fun and educational.

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Angela’s avatar, Imagina Writer.

Barry Joseph, the Online Leadership Program Director at Global Kids, explains, "Virtual worlds make it easier to use educational techniques that are great at engaging and teaching youth, but harder to reproduce offline, such as learning through creating or modifying, developing social networks, working in teams, being involved with informal peer mentoring, and more."

In December 2006, the Global Kids Island partnered with UNICEF to hold a weeklong World Fit for Children cyber-festival. Teens from around the world competed to create in-world structures and participated in workshops that addressed the topics of HIV/AIDS, education, health, and child exploitation and abuse.



Other activities on the island have included a question-and-answer session about the genocide in Darfur with Mia Farrow; a simulcast of the MacArthur Foundation's announcement of its new Digital Media, Learning and Education Initiative; and a discussion (and dance party) on youth and digital media.

On the Global Kids Island, teens not only talk about global warming, but they can witness a simulated volcano erupt. They can spend an evening watching a virtual glacier melt and understand the consequences of rising sea levels. Activities like these are often followed by a debate between teens from all over the globe about how these problems can affect the real world and what changes they can make in their own communities now.

While these teens are talking about some heavy duty issues, the goal of Global Kids is to create a space that is both edu-

cational and creative. As Joseph says, they don't need to feel like they have to act seriously. "They just know that they are being challenged and having fun."

Making the Virtual Real

Okay. So it seems that TSL is more than just about playing dress-up or mindless socializing. TSL residents have found a way to put the virtual world to good use.

"My passion is building and teaching. I also enjoy running various activities. I love working on projects such as developing this island," Marsi reminds me. In the next few years, he'll be looking for a job that deals with computers. He says his work at TSL improves his ability "to work with oth-

ers on group projects and have patience for others who don't know how to play."

Closterman concurs.

When I ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, he says, "Probably an architect. And Second Life is truly helping my architectural education!"

It appears that these teens are here for the same reason I am: they imagine their lives a little differently from the ones they are living

now. Additionally, they are eager to use a virtual world in order to understand how they can improve the real one.

"Even if just one teen feels more respected for the talents they have, then we've done our job," Czarnecki says. "We can sustain the island and build partnerships to make a better world. And it all starts from one pixel." ■

Join Teen Second Life at <http://teen.secondlife.com>.

To read more about the Global Kids Island, check out <http://holymeatballs.org>.

To read more about the Eye4You Alliance Island, check out <http://eye4youalliance.youthtech.info>.



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Hellman. He and his friend have a Web comic that they draw entirely on a digital tablet. They don't do any drawing on paper at all. I think they even live in different cities and do everything over e-mail.

What has been your favorite project to work on?

Actually, my favorite is the kids' book I'm working on now. Let's just say it may be the most unusual math book ever published for children. Like many of the ideas I've had for kids' books, it grew out of lessons I've tried to communicate to my own kids. I have an eight-year-old and a twelve-year-old, and those are two great ages. Entertaining and enlightening my children is extremely important.

Dr. Seuss is one of my heroes because he was able to be completely entertaining and educational at the same time. He would educate you, and you knew you were being educated but you said, "What the heck? I love the rhymes, the pictures, the characters. Go ahead and educate me. It's okay." I never resented the morals of Dr. Seuss like I resented them in so many other children's books. Dr. Seuss was strongly moral, but it was always fun.

Last night I was working on the book and it was bliss. I felt like this is what I'm supposed to be doing. When I was done with these drawings, I was paging through them and I was smiling. So, that's a good sign. There's hope for the old guy, yet. ■