

RezEdREPORT

The Hub for Learning and Virtual Worlds

RezEd.org



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RezEd

RezEd: The Hub for Learning and Virtual Worlds

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Additional copies of this report can be found at <http://www.RezEd.org>.

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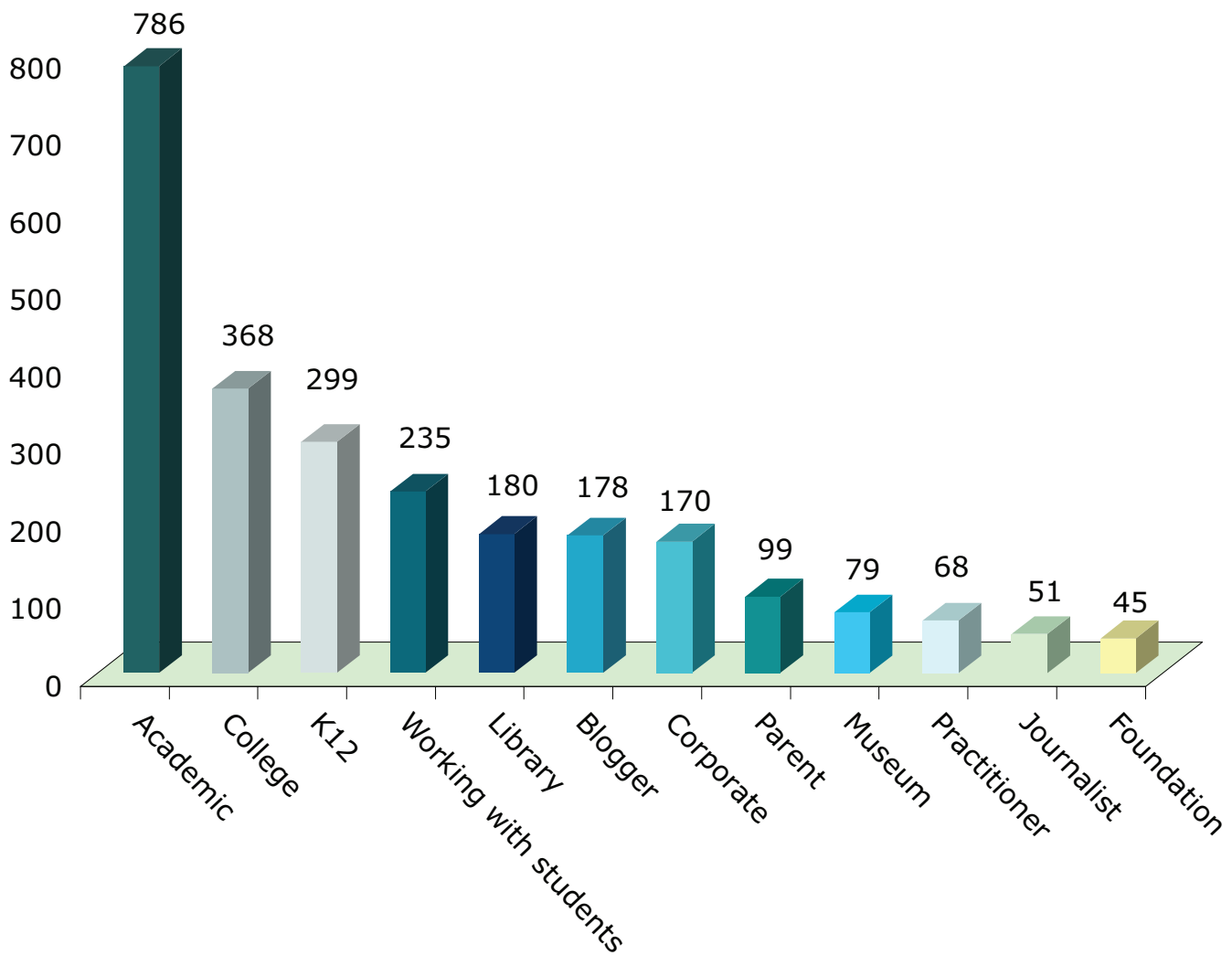
RezEd was developed by Global Kids, an independent educational nonprofit organization that educates and inspires urban youth to become successful students, community leaders, and global citizens. It launched after being selected through the HASTAC competition and builds on prior work in virtual worlds made possible through support from the MacArthur Foundation.

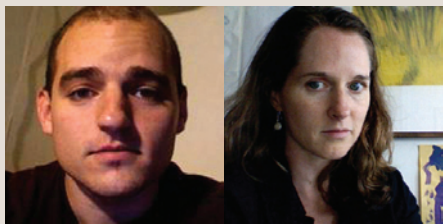
RezEd is a community of practice that brings attention to the myriad ways virtual worlds are being used for learning in various settings. It covers both commercial and educational virtual worlds through news updates; multimedia resources; a podcast series with youth, theorists, world builders, practitioners and experts in the field; a curated best practice report series, various digital media resources, guest-moderated discussions, and more. In addition, knowledge is generated and shared as members contribute photos and videos, facilitate special interest groups, and manage personal blogs.

Welcome to the first RezEd seasonal report! This publication summarizes the activities taking place within the emerging community of those using virtual worlds for learning. In addition, this inaugural report offers a special focus on Ethics and Virtual Worlds, introduced by a team from Harvard University's GoodPlay Project.

RezEd, the Hub for Learning and Virtual Worlds, provides practitioners with access to high quality resources and research in the field to establish a strong network among those using virtual worlds for learning. Launched in beta in mid-March of 2008, RezEd is a comprehensive resource for teachers, parents, librarians, after school educators, and those simply interested in utilizing these increasingly popular tools and tracking the growth of this emerging field.

RezEd Member Profiles





At the GoodPlay Project, headed up by Howard Gardner at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, we've been conducting in-depth interviews with 15-25 year-olds in order to better understand the ethical implications of young people's online activities. We'd like to tell you a bit more about our research in hope of generating some discussion around ethics in virtual worlds.

What is ethics?

We see actions as ethical insofar as they impact or relate to a community, be that a community of students and teachers in a particular school, of doctors who are members of the American Medical Association, of gamers who play World of Warcraft, of Battlestar Galactica fans who share fan videos in an online forum, or of young people who are "friends" on MySpace. Thinking about the ethical implications of one's actions involves considering one's roles and responsibilities in the context of community; this requires a certain amount of abstract thinking, and so can sometimes be difficult for young people, especially children.

Ethics and virtual worlds

Virtual worlds are in many ways separate from "real life": they are frontiers where actions can hold different meanings, where decisions are often perceived to be low-stakes, and where young people have more freedom as compared to offline spaces. In short, virtual worlds present young people with new ethical landscapes that harbor great promises and significant perils. For example, the same anonymity and freedom that allows young people to explore new identities and to create and collaborate in new and productive ways online allows them to deceive others and undermine community norms with little accountability.

How are young people thinking about their actions in virtual worlds?

In talking with 15 gamers who play in virtual worlds, we have gotten a better sense of how players think about their actions in these contexts. Many players doing "unethical" things justify their actions by downplaying their significance, arguing that "it's just a game"; others justify and condemn actions only in the context of the rules set by designers, arguing that "if the game allows you to do it, go for it." There are some players, however, who evaluate their actions by asking whether they support or impede the goals of their in-game guild or of the game community as a whole. We consider the latter to be "ethical thinking," which seems important to encourage in virtual world participants, both because it will help improve their online communities and possibly engender ethical thinking in other, offline contexts.

What helps foster ethical thinking?

There were two interesting patterns we've observed across our interviews. First, players who had mentors who helped socialize them into their virtual world when they first joined tended to think more about their responsibilities to other players. Second, players who were very involved in guilds that created their own rules, or who were otherwise involved in creating and enforcing norms and rules, were much more likely to think about their actions in relation to the community, as opposed to thinking about their actions only with respect to the rules of the game.

We've heard a great deal from young gamers, but are excited to hear from others in the RezEd community who can bring new perspectives to the question of ethics in virtual worlds.

RezEd members and experts in the field were invited to share their thoughts on Ethics and Virtual Worlds. What follows is a brief overview of the perspectives shared through discussions and interviews on the RezEd site.

James Paul Gee - Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy at Arizona State University

“Ethics in virtual worlds is a vexing question to me because I think it betokens, sadly, a bunch of adults trying to dictate how young people should organize themselves, usually in fear that they will do bad things. But in fact, if you look at virtual worlds like Second Life or World of Warcraft or others, what you see is people negotiating new systems of being together. In fact, we are reinventing the public sphere.

Most Americans don't spend much time with people who are not like them. In the old days people would mix in the public square with every social class, with different people from very different backgrounds. Today's public sphere, where Americans come together across class and racial divides, has gotten smaller and smaller as we have economically stratified ourselves into many classes. One can't do that in World of Warcraft (WOW). In WOW everybody can be there; you have to confront the full array of diversity and others don't always behave the way you want them to behave. You might have a bunch of politically correct standards from your college, but others don't buy them just because you tell them you are a college professor. All of a sudden you must cross lines of class, race, country, interests, and politics. In WOW, we have to negotiate new ethical standards and people are doing that every day. That is what I think is exciting: it doesn't work to dictate ethics. So we have a grand social experiment going on in which people are negotiating ethics; what I think we can do, as experts, is not dictate ethical standards, but help with those negotiations, give resources to those who are negotiating.

Every technology can be used for evil or good, and as we build virtual worlds with all the possibilities we have been talking about, we need to remember this. Of course corporations are going to build virtual worlds to sell you products, and right wing and left wing groups will build them to sell you their politics; this is where kids today are going to have to learn to be savvy. And I think they are learning, but they have to be savvy about how each virtual world is designed: who designed it, with what interests, and how much space does it give me to contribute to the design? Otherwise, these virtual worlds can be used for bad. The interesting thing about powerful technology is that it can be used for good or bad.”

Peggy Sheehy - Middle School Information Specialist, Suffern Middle School

“I'm very interested in the conversation that's now taking place about avatars and identity and how anonymity impacts that identity. While we strive to instill positive values, along with net safety, we have observed the role of anonymity to be a curious factor. My students are adolescents, (13-16) and are “traceable” when in the virtual environment (their avatar identity can be traced to their real life identity by the adults working with them,) yet they still seem to function under that guise of virtual identity. They enter the world and immediately disclose their real life identity to those around them, and yet they have manifested the ability to assume a new and unique virtual identity in order to adapt to a particular task. We have repeatedly witnessed the transformation of students who become what they are charged with – whether it be via role-play scenarios or when asked to behave as a new kind of learner, often in an area that previously yielded no measure of success for them as learners. Once in the virtual mindset, they seem to be able to assume the role of a scientist, or an architect, etc., with a confidence established via that semblance of anonymity. They take risks, and participate without fear of consequence. Perhaps the fact that they are ultimately traceable is prohibitive to negative behaviors, or perhaps it is that they are experiencing success, developing self-esteem, and embarking in the psychosocial moratorium intrinsic to the needs of the adolescent. One of my students has stated that he enjoys learning in the virtual world because he is “smarter” there. Others have commented that they feel less likely to be criticized, or care less about that possibility – because it isn't “really” them. So, we seem to have two distinct outlooks on participation in the virtual world. One is a strong sense of identification with one's avatar that contributes to that student's experiential

learning and social development and the other is a more disconnected view of one's avatar— which seems to support greater risk-taking and freedom of expression. Curiously, both ends of the spectrum yield similar outcomes. The kids are stretching their pre-established (whether self or system imposed) boundaries of themselves as learners.”

Andrew, RezEd Community member, New York, New York

“I think mentorship may not always lead to “ethical behavior”; i.e., the drug dealer that “mentors” a kid from the block to learn strategies for avoiding cops or the baseball star that “mentors” the rookie by encouraging him to take performance enhancing drugs. I wonder what residue, other than potential “ethical” behavior, is gleaned from having a relationship around introducing a noobie (new user) to the rules within a new domain?”

Linda Burch - Chief Education & Strategy Officer for Common Sense Media

“I think there's a really interesting question about identity in virtual worlds raised by the creation of a second identity and sometimes multiple identities. When does this become deception versus just playing with roles? I think this is a really interesting question for kids in terms of their self identify. The question of cheating, made easier by the anonymity of virtual worlds, is one that surfaces among parents and educators in schools that I know, especially the question of appropriating other people's property or using their passwords. There are many ways in which you can operate in a virtual world, and many behaviors that we would think are unethical off-line, that can be done with a lot more anonymity and invisibility. Finally, I think there are the cyber-bullying kinds of questions. I think kids have become used to speaking in a language online that they normally would never use to anyone's face. And so I think there is a lot to be done in trying to have kids really reflect before they self-reveal and say certain things to others. Those are the big issues for me.”

Tracy Rebe - Assistant Principal at the High School for Global Citizenship

“Particularly from the educational standpoint, I'm not all that concerned. I think that with good teaching and good, engaging exercises and activities, utilizing virtual worlds really allows students to learn a lot about communities and interacting with one another and it can be very positive. Students can learn a lot about different reactions to different types of people, how students see each other in a different environment. I feel that as long as it's well created, well developed, and well controlled from an educational standpoint, I have very few concerns.”

Liz Lawley- Assistant Professor of the Department of Information Technology at Rochester Institute of Technology

“Ethics in virtual worlds means learning appropriate behaviors just like in any other context. Ethics are ethics whether in virtual worlds or real worlds, and the issue is learning appropriate behaviors with other people. Sometimes it is very hard to communicate to kids and teenagers the larger concepts of ethical behavior in large systems. One thing I think every parent has to deal with is trying to explain why an apple costs so much in the store if you can grow them for pennies, or why it is that we are worried about exploiting farm workers or things like that. These are hard concepts to express when you are dealing with global systems.

I had a moment when my son starting playing World of Warcraft where he came to me around Christmas time, and said to me: “I found a way to make a lot of gold in World of Warcraft,” and I said “Really? How?” He said, “Well, if I go into the low level starting areas and I buy eggs from new players who have them from killing the birds, then I can go to the auction house and sell them for way more money to high level players who don't want to bother killing the birds themselves.” This opened up a huge opportunity for us to talk about the whole concept of “the middle man” in economics, which was important, as well as whether it was ethical to pay the brand new players, who don't know any better, a couple of silver, and then turn around and sell the eggs to somebody else for a lot of gold. His point - and I thought it was a legitimate point - is that the low level players would otherwise just sell the eggs to a vendor in the game for a lot less money than he is giving them. So they are getting more money than they would have, and he is getting more money than he would have, and the players

who want the eggs are getting them for what they consider to be a fair price. So everybody wins. And while one can argue whether or not that is necessarily the right interpretation, it was a really wonderful way to open up a discussion of whether this is fair and why, and to force him to think about that and talk about why is it fair that they are only getting a few silvers?”

Deborah Fields - Doctoral student at the University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

“I think virtual world education is actually a very promising area to involve kids in terms of speaking about ethics and how you affect other people. There are issues of right and wrong and often they are socially clarified for us in schools; we are told what’s right and wrong. But in a lot of virtual spaces, you don’t have relationships that may last long term. In the real world if you “dis” your friend, that’s going to have an effect on you in your daily life; but if you make fun of someone in a virtual world that you don’t know, that may not have an effect on you. So to me ethics in a virtual world presents an opportunity to discuss and help kids as they go through this process and think about the effects they have on others. You know, when someone does something to them, how does that make them feel. And that begins to build up a different value system that may transfer across worlds where we may not really have established right and wrong rules.”

Birdie Newborn, RezEd community member

“Thank you, Sam, for such a simple statement about ethics. Being aware of others is so simple, yet such a growth hurdle for some. I can’t speak directly about how youth respond, because for our pilot project, none applied. However, the project, the Summer of Love 1967, was designed to be half-done by the time students arrived, so that they would have a clue, and could find plenty of places for initiative and collaboration. It certainly works with our Theme Team, with a little jostling of elbows for territory now and again. So, we don’t set out the rules, the rules develop out of the project.

I did have several instances involving ethics. One was squatters with skyboxes doing their own thing, but occasionally dropping stuff. When we met them, I was impressed by their builds, and invited them to participate. However, they didn’t take the hint, and when I levied a charge for prims, they all left. Not joiners, apparently. Three more newcomers built inappropriate structures (one was a brothel), but one of them apologized and turned out to be a builder who responded to my suggestions, and added an appropriate structure for 1967. It’s that step of recognizing that there is a community, I think, that makes the difference. Noobies may be particularly difficult because of inexperience. I strive for an open community, yet that challenges me almost every week.”

Selen Turkay, Doctoral student, Instructional Technology and Media, Teacher College, Columbia University.

“I think consciousness of ethical behaviors is crucial in every part of life. It is easier to forget when users/players/residents are virtually anonymous in online environments. I don’t know the best way to teach ethical behaviors in games -- maybe with special quests where players experience how unethical behavior affect others or with quick prompts scattered through players’ game experience. Also, because cheating in a gaming world is quite common, kids/players may think that it’s ethical. So, they should be reminded that if they cheat they do something against terms and conditions of the game, and it is unfair to other players.

In any case, we should remind kids/players that even when they are in a virtual environment they are interacting with other people, and if they behave irresponsibly, it will hurt other people as it would in real life.”

Unre Visagie, RezEd community member, Pretoria, South Africa

“In our existing real world, ethics are maintained in community structures of family, leaders, and visibility of actions. In such a community each individual experiences the consequences of their actions. We implement access to the internet for productivity, increased competency, and added productive value. We found that you must take into account the integrated community on the internet and thus close the loop. We also found that it goes very wrong when young people are alone on the internet world. Give the whole family, as well as leaders, access at the same time, and current community-based ethics seem to stay in place.”

Podcasts > Audio Podcasts > Education > RezEd

RezEd
mediasnackers
 Category: Education
 Language: English
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RezEd features a series of bi-weekly podcasts, jointly produced by Global Kids and MediaSnackers, that focus on how virtual worlds are being used by educators, non-profits, and foundations. Podcasts feature interviews with key players in the field, promote online resources and real-world events, and cover major developments in these emerging fields. All episodes begin with highlights of recent news and end with a look at upcoming events and announcements.



Episode 1: Virtual Worlds go to Congress!

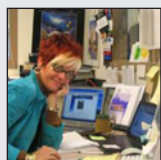
CEO of the New Media Consortium, Larry Johnson, speaks about his recent testimony before Congress on virtual worlds.



Episode 2: Quest Atlantis: Narratizing Academic Content through Videogames

Sasha Barab, Associate Professor in Learning Sciences, IST and Cognitive Science at Indiana University, speaks

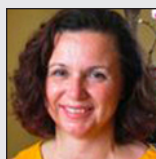
about Quest Atlantis, an international learning and teaching project that uses a 3D multi-user environment to immerse children, ages 9-15, in educational tasks.



Episode 3: Peggy Sheehy on Learning in Virtual Worlds

Peggy Sheehy, a middle school information specialist facilitating the Ramapo Islands Project on

Teen Second Life, speaks about her experiences as the first ever school-based educator to use TSL in the classroom.



Episode 4: Linda Burch on the Present & Future Role of Virtual Worlds in the Lives of Youth

Linda Burch, Chief Education & Strategy Officer for Common Sense

Media, an organization dedicated to improving the media and entertainment lives of kids and families, speaks about the present and future role of virtual worlds.



Episode 5: Amira Fouad introduces RezEd at vBusiness Expo

Amira Fouad, Program Manager with Global Kids Online Leadership Program, introduces RezEd: The Hub

for Learning and Virtual Worlds at Clever Zebra's vBusiness Expo in Second Life in April.



Episode 6: Tracy Rebe Teaches High School Science in Teen Second Life

Tracy Rebe, Assistant Principal at the High School for Global Citizenship, based in Brooklyn NY, discusses the

Science through Second Life Program that has met every day during the spring 2008 semester.



Episode 7: Jeremy Kemp on Immersive Environments and their Opportunities

Jeremy Kemp, an instructional designer at San Jose State University who began teaching online in 1999, talks about his varied experiences in immersive environments and projects.



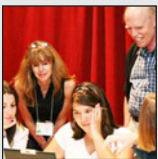
Episode 8: Youth Voices on Using Teen Second Life to Make Films

A group of NYC high school students speak about using Second Life to produce an animated film that explores the relationship between racism and equal access to education.



Episode 9: Donna Stevens on the Implementation of Quest Atlantis in the Classroom

Donna Stevens, Director of Implementation for Quest Atlantis at Indiana University, discusses the implementation process as it relates to teacher training, the students and the classroom.



Episode 10: Special Games Learning & Society Conference Overview

Barry Joseph and Rafi Santo from Global Kids, along with Otis, a Global Kids Youth Leader, traveled to the fourth annual Games, Learning and Society Conference (GLS) in Madison, Wisconsin, to produce this special conference overview featuring exclusively the learning and virtual worlds elements.



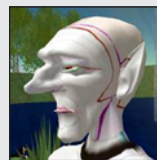
Episode 11: Mother and Son on their Experience and Focus on Virtual Worlds

Featuring an interview at the recent GLS Conference with Liz and Lane Lawley about their perspectives on virtual worlds.



Episode 12: James Paul Gee on Virtual Worlds and the Power of Situated Learning

Dr. James Paul Gee, a long time expert in the academic field of gaming and learning, speaks with RezEd at the GLS Conference on virtual worlds and the power of situated learning.



Episode 13: Jonathan Richter on the Upcoming Second Life Education Community Conference

Jonathan Richter is an educational technology research scientist, educator, and futurist at the University of Oregon, discussing here the forthcoming Second Life Education Community Conference.



Episode 14: Sarah "Intellagirl" Robbins on the Impact of Virtual Platforms on Learning

Sarah "Intellagirl" Robbins is a Ph.D. Candidate at Ball State University and the editor of the Second Life Education blog. In this RezEd interview, Intellagirl discusses how virtual platforms impact learning as well as the potential challenges for using virtual worlds in educational practice.



Episode 15: Dizzywood: Using the Virtual Platform in Educational Settings

This week's podcast features Scott Arpajian, Co-Founder of Dizzywood with Patti Purcell, Principal of Bel Air Elementary School on using the virtual platform in an educational setting. Dizzywood is a virtual world and social game that encourages tweens to engage in collaborative play.

Over the summer of 2008, RezEd published a wide range of best practices written by numerous innovative practitioners using virtual worlds for learning. RezEd Best Practices capture the experiences and lessons learned by leading academics, researchers, librarians, and educators in the virtual worlds of ActiveWorlds, Quest Atlantis, Second Life and Teen Second Life. What follows is a brief introduction of each practitioner's respective best practice.

Kylie Pepler of Indiana University's Learning Sciences Program, in her best practice, "Carving out a Unique Time to Privilege a Quest Atlantis Program in After-School Spaces," offers insight into using virtual worlds in after-school spaces. Pepler suggests "It's important to advertise opportunities for youth to explore new activities, as there is often a lot of competition from activities or sites that are already familiar to youth. Oftentimes, educators mistakenly think that youth will naturally open and explore any application that's loaded onto the computer. And, although youth are naturally curious, they can often be overwhelmed by the wealth of new software and gaming spaces available to them."

<http://tiny.cc/aQ8Dr>

Peggy Sheehy of Ramapo Central School District, in her best practice, "Exploring Body Image in Second Life," shares her surprise when her students not only enjoyed creating avatars to explore body image, but engaged in profound group discussions as well. Sheehy recommends using Second Life for deeper conversations around body image: "When we cover body image in a traditional class, it's easy for most students to discuss how they feel about the media, but it's more difficult for students to discuss how these messages affect them personally."

<http://tiny.cc/sheehy91>

Barbara Johnson of Arizona State University, in her best practice "Walking the Line between Guided and Self-Directed Learning Within a Socially-Situated IT Learning Program for Girls," discusses how virtual worlds can facilitate advanced learning of computer-related education. Johnson suggests "...that learning – of any sort, including fluency with IT – is best facilitated when learners are actively participating in meaningful practices that are associated with compelling identities and communities."

<http://tiny.cc/johnson714>

Jeremy Koester of Braver Consulting, in his best practice, "Using Social Games for Immersive Language Learning and Term/Concept Introduction," shares his

experience in developing Windbag for language immersion. Koester advises, "...although I may have a purpose for a development, that may or may not be the impact that it has for learning. I learned to be open minded about others' thoughts on my developments and their applications."

<http://tiny.cc/koester424>

Lori Bell of Alliance Library System, in her best practice, "Building, Creation, and Collaboration between Libraries and Partners," discusses the need for libraries and educators to be in virtual worlds as they rapidly expand. Bell advises: "Collaboration and community are key. Virtual worlds provide libraries with a way to make new partnerships and collaborate with other libraries from across the globe, and other educational groups, non-profits, and corporations."

<http://tinyurl.com/loribell>

Dr. Pamela Mitchell of Kent State University, in her best practice, "Virtual Interdisciplinary Practices," discusses the tremendous possibility of using Second Life as a platform to bring together educators, practitioners and people with disabilities to contribute to education of university students in education, allied health and related fields. Dr. Mitchell explains, "We believe that this project offers the potential for increased engagement and deeper levels of learning by students in pre-service preparation in fields such as speech language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychology, education/special education, nursing, and rehabilitation counseling."

<http://tiny.cc/JfmIQ>

Dr. Chris Dede of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in his best practice, "Using Virtual Worlds for Sophisticated Assessment," shares the affordances of learning assessment as part of The River City curriculum, a multi-user virtual environment on middle school science. Dr. Dede explains that by "collecting data about how students interact with the various types of artifacts, we can analyze student movement through the world, looking at patterns of movement, interactions, chat, and questioning of River City

residents. Combining these data with basic student-level predictors allows for a sophisticated analysis of how participant characteristics interact with in-world activity over time, and how these interactions may influence student learning.”

<http://tiny.cc/5RAgR>

Barry Joseph of Global Kids Inc., in his best practice, “Leveraging Social Networks within a Virtual World to Teach,” shares his experience in using the Teen Second Life community as a network in Playing 4 Keeps, an after school gaming program which treats video games as a form of youth media that addresses important social and global issues. Joseph states “Our ability to run this program could only have been possible through a virtual world, as it allowed us to work beyond our abilities by harnessing an informal network of experts available, live, at a moment’s notice.”

<http://tiny.cc/joseph746>

Shawna Rosenzweig of Global Kids Inc., in her best practice, “Running Effective Contests in Teen Second Life,” suggests ways to promote international collaboration through art in virtual world settings. Rosenzweig advises: “By using a virtual world setting, we were able to have participants from both Europe and North America come together in the workshops, as well as enter their art submissions. The virtual setting also provided us with an environment where the teen artists could submit artwork they created, either as a 3D virtual build or an art piece created in the real world, such as a drawing or painting.”

<http://tiny.cc/rosenzweig147>

Rafi Santo of Global Kids Inc., in his best practice, “Creating Teen Leadership Development Programs in Virtual Worlds,” recommends that educators keep in mind the importance of trust building and differentiated communication styles when conducting leadership development in a distance learning context.

<http://tiny.cc/santo>

Jeremy Kemp of San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science, in his best practice, “Using Second Life ‘vPortfolios’ to mirror ePortfolios in a Graduate Library Science program,” discusses the strengths of using virtual worlds at the graduate level. Kemp recommends the use of virtual worlds because “[Students] are

excited that they can save time using Second Life with powerful modeling tools and interactive scripts to arrange their work and explain its significance. This accomplishment leads to greater levels of engagement with the project and induces project-based learning.”

<http://tiny.cc/kemp>

Kelly Czarnecki of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, in her best practice, “Taking Down Jail Walls: Using Technology and Virtual World Programs to Bring Opportunities to Incarcerated Youth,” discusses how working with community partners and staff on the ground provided opportunities to engage youthful offenders in virtual world programming. By utilizing Teen Second Life, incarcerated youth were able to develop the “skills to work together in small groups, learning how to present themselves online, negotiating and presenting a project that they believe will make a difference in their community (whether it’s the detention center itself, online, partnering outside the walls of the center, or a combination of all), interacting with others, and shaping their environment—all of which constitute an important set of competencies to have in order to shape a more positive direction of their future.”

<http://tinyurl.com/czarnecki>

Anthony Curtis of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, in his best practice, “Using Virtual World Simulation to Teach Journalistic Interviewing,” explains how for his students, Second Life offers broad potential for using simulations to prepare for real-world experiences in a safe environment. “It’s a good way to enhance experiential learning under an instructor’s guidance, and allows individuals to practice skills with mentoring, try out new ideas, and learn from their mistakes.”

<http://tinyurl.com/antcurtis>

Margaret Corbit of SciCentr at Cornell University Outreach, in her best practice, “Bringing Virtual Worlds into the Classroom Through the Backdoor: After School,” explains how SciCentr developed the SciFair Model, a process model that outlines a sequence of activities through which people learn to comfortably engage, explore, and create virtual worlds.

<http://tinyurl.com/SciCentr>

Do you have a pressing question about virtual worlds and learning? Do you wonder what others have been saying? RezEd community discussions provide the opportunity for participation in interesting conversations exploring a wide range of topics. What follows are highlights from a few of the many discussions amongst RezEd members throughout the summer of 2008. The discussions are ongoing and we invite all members of the RezEd community to join the conversation.



Liam O'Donnell

What do you want from educational virtual worlds?

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed>

As I've posted before, virtual worlds for kids are here and more are on the way. Many are meant to be places where kids can have fun, hang out and not worry about "learning stuff" (even though I'd argue that there is still much to learn in these spaces). While that's all well and good, I can't help but think about the potential for virtual worlds designed to be used by educators to facilitate learning. For many, however, virtual worlds + education = boring, something that kids will never want to explore.

I disagree. I've spent the better part of the last ten years creating books and graphic novels that engage young learners while sneaking in a little learning while they weren't looking. I'd like to do the same with virtual worlds. If I were creating an educational virtual world for K-8 learners, I would make sure it had:

- an engaging storyline that hooked players from the first screen. Story is everything! If the world doesn't have an overarching storyline that pulls students the way a good novel does, then the world is dead already. (Okay, that's the end of my pitch for the need for quality writers in virtual worlds.)
- allow players to join up in smaller groups of 4 or 5, to work together - we do this with in-class activities and many MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) are based on the 5 person party hierarchy, so there's no reason why it won't work in an educational virtual world.
- challenges and activities that not only tap into higher level thinking, problem solving and reasoning but also affect the virtual world the students are playing in. If they use their knowledge of gears and pulleys to irrigate the farmers' crops, then those crops should be blooming the next time students log in

- the ability to work with students from other schools on activities - think Flat Classroom the MMO.
- a blog or journal element that allows students' work/findings to be posted outside of the game world - on the school website or class blog.

I can think of much more. But for now, I want to turn this question over to you:

What features/content/whatever do you want to see in your ideal educational virtual world?

"I really like the example of irrigating the farmer's field. Just in the short time I have been building I have actually run into many situations where I had to use coordinate geometry formulas to properly place objects, or trigonometry/the Pythagorean theorem to build a mathematically correct object...[it] taught me more about solid geometry than I learned in any mathematics course ever." - Trevor Meister

"[I] never thought that actually building the world itself would be a great way to teach mathematic concepts. Instead of presenting a fully formed world, it'd be great to challenge students to finish the environment by building structures, roads, etc." - Liam O'Donnell

"I want a Dynabook (in the Alan Kay sense), or perhaps A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer (in the Neal Stephenson sense)." - Troy McConaghy

"One of my favorite elements of that technology was the fact that there were live actors (ractors) portraying the characters that Nell met in her education. It got me thinking that it'd be great to a virtual world scenario where students could create their own learning quests for their fellow students and then take on the role of NPCs (non-player character) in the quest - in a way becoming ractors themselves." - Liam O'Donnell



BlueWings Hayek

Virtual worlds and criminal justice reform

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed5>

I have been working with incarcerated youth for over five years as a public librarian. I am able to work with a group of youthful offenders using Teen Second Life. My hope is that

when they leave the facility, they will continue being able to access the virtual world and develop their skills and online partnerships they began while starting the project inside the facility and mentor their peers on how to interact in the environment as well. I think it is important that those in facilities closed off to the rest of the world can find positive ways to interact online as they are developing skills they will likely need to have when they exit the center, such as communicating with a diverse set of people, knowing they can control their environment when things may seem out of control, and working in teams to make a difference.

What role might virtual worlds play in developing a more sustainable model of criminal justice reform and how do we make a case that access is important to these populations?

"I am interested in finding out how you managed to encourage the 'powers that be' to allow those young people you are dealing with to have internet access. Here in Australia there are very tight restrictions on internet access for incarcerated young people and adults, mainly due to security fears. So I am curious as to how that hurdle was negotiated in your case." - Ian Warren

"In my case, I have a librarian that I work with at the facility who felt that the security measures that were able to be put in place by Second Life (i.e., closing of the island during the workshop) and the fact that we would have a ration of 1:1 or 1:2 with staff and incarcerated youth while on the internet was enough to go forth with the project." - BlueWings Hayek

"I imagine the 1:1, 1:2 ratios are actually necessary in any event to educate the young people you are dealing with on how to use SL (Second Life)." - Ian Warren

"It is helpful, yes. They also blog and I'm trying to get them to podcast what they are learning so far. Using a virtual world (as we all know) is just one part in connecting with others." - BlueWings Hayek

"I'm curious about how computer-literate the youth were. Gamers? Nerds? Or learning everything as they go?" - Birdie Newborn

"The youth completed a digital literary media survey before entering the program. Most answers seemed to indicate that they had gamed before. Whether or not they consider themselves, 'gamers,' I don't know. They also indicated that they felt confident in teaching themselves new things on a computer by playing around with it and seeing what happens and that they are comfortable working with others in regards to using digital media. As far as if this is good for them or me, I guess only time will tell. How does one measure 'good'? I would imagine if this knowledge, these partnerships, and their skills take them to different opportunities as well as allow other facilities to participate in a similar endeavor, then that would be good." - BlueWings Hayek



Eloise Pasteur

Public perceptions of teaching in virtual worlds

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed2>

As most of you that read this know, I make my living from contracting by building for educators in Second Life™. I'm going to slightly edit (so as to make anonymous) the comment passed to me by one of my contractors from her director of e-learning policy about teaching in virtual worlds:

"I took a look at Second Life and other virtual worlds a few months ago and reached the conclusion that some people teaching at universities had spent a lot of time constructing sites, but there was precious little evidence that they were used to any good educational purpose. It seems to me that our students clearly see virtual worlds as places for fun, not for study. I am also concerned that the active life of a concept such as Second Life will be short – again making the necessary investment of time very expensive."

Do you see the same attitude? Do you have good evidence that could be used to counter this? Do you agree with it? Are there things we, as educators, can do to counter this? Should we do some or all of them?

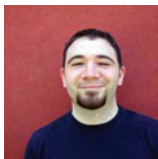
"I don't think the 'having fun' perception is a bad one, and can be a leveraged into gradual acceptance and stronger understanding of the educational benefits of virtual worlds." - Rik Panganiban

"Like chalk and a blackboard, SL is a teaching tool and as such is neutral. It's what you DO in it that makes it worth using or not." - Kamael Xevious

"The 'if you build it, they will come' concept does not seem to attract people for very long. The concept of community and interaction were not as high a priority as they could have been and it is not simple or quick to develop vibrant communities with rich interactions. After finishing a complex Island build, I would advise clients to hire someone to act as a community manager; most didn't and after a while, no one showed up anymore and the builds were abandoned." - Trevor Meister

"Once people experience SL on a good day, just the same as a regular learning environment, it can work well. Under certain circumstances it can also provide an advantage -- sometimes it's cheaper, more efficient, pedagogically superior... and sometimes it's not. But, it only needs to be 'as good as' to justify itself as an alternative. The public perception of virtual worlds is important because it'll feed into students' expectations and this can prime them for a bad experience.

I've conducted surveys of students (n=100 approx) and measured attitudes towards 3D MUVes (multi-user virtual environments) from students, and the majority don't like it before trying. Afterwards, they tend to be polarized into for and against, and this is often correlated with their experience of inductions. The initial learning curve seems to be the critical factor in overall attitude. The lack of evidence doesn't mean the platform is negative - it's the flying spaghetti monster argument all over again... We should keep chipping away at producing an evidence base whilst using pedagogically sound and ethical methodology." - Milton Broome



Adam Ingram-Goble

Imperialism and virtual worlds: what is a reasonable balance for education?

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed3>

A final aspect of Quest Atlantis (QA) is the seven Social Commitments. These are Compassionate Wisdom, Social Responsibility, Personal Agency, Creative Expression, Environmental Awareness, Healthy Communities, and Diversity Affirmation. As Kurt Squire notes, games are ideological spaces, and we can readily argue that curricula and school systems are as well. For QA, the Social Commitments are part of our ideological space.

As virtual worlds for education become more wide-spread, and international, how do we develop these ideologies such that they are not imperialistic? How do we respect the player, and support their growth and education in a manner that balances the needs of the existing education systems, and the needs of the users?

"Partnerships would be the name of the game for me, Adam. As QA moves into other regions in the world, it must partner with local designers and educators to fully embrace the culture, mores, educational practices and needs of those areas. There is a big difference between being a world that has a global spread of users and being a global virtual world." - Brownwyn Stuckey

"I think also that you do not need to then comment on the existing education system or any 'deficient' ideologies it embodies. The critiques will emerge from their own growth." - Joe Clark

"There's a danger that any situated understanding can become a colonial power, even such seemingly 'universal' and innocuous ones as you describe for QA, Adam. So maybe you take a page from Paolo Freire's playbook (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) by finding ways for players to define and articulate their own Social Commitments; in short, by helping them interrogate and problematize the game's own ideology." - Joe Clark

"I think Brownwyn's points about partnerships are key to avoiding an imperialistic bias in QA, as much as this is possible, given the privilege we enjoy by even discussing using games in our classrooms. Joe is right to invoke Freire and invite players to question the ideology of the game itself. Allowing QA to not be elevated to the position of an untouchable space, but asking students to think about how they would create such a learning space will not only help minimize any accusations of imperialistic indoctrination on the parts of the QA creators, it will also empower students to question, learn and then act upon that learning, moving through the cycle of praxis that Freire so rightly places at the foundation of true learning.

Giving learners the tools, literally, to create their own QA adventures is another way to shift this balance of power from game creator to game player (and turning players into creators themselves in the process.) For me, a great model for this is the Aurora toolset released with the Neverwinter Nights game (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurora_toolset) that has allowed players to create not only modules for the game, but entire persistent worlds where, to this day (6 years after its release), hundreds of gamers - including myself - regularly play and explore." - Liam O'Donnell

"So if any virtual world embodies an ideology, whether it be QA, WOW, SL, WhyVille, etc., is the answer always to problematize the system's ideology, and to give the users the tools to author their own experiences? Is that what our educational goals for virtual worlds should be directed towards, or are there other forms of participation that address the issue of imperialism and education?" - Adam Ingram-Goble

"I know that there is a terrible history of imperialism, both ideological and otherwise, but I don't think that should make people, and especially educators, shy away from making any statement at all. Transparency and allowing for the learner to cut examine critically what the educator is putting forth is really important, and will act as a safety against occasions that arise because of our own tendency to err." - Rafi Santo

**Peggy Sheehy****Show me the learning**<http://tinyurl.com/sheehy>

This September will mark the beginning of the third year for Ramapo Central Schools to support learning on our estates in Teen SL, Ramapo Islands. Year one we were really just finding our way -- seeing what worked and what didn't. At the end of the year we were excited to see our expectations, in terms of engagement and investment, confirmed, but also started to examine some benefits of the participatory culture that we had not anticipated. We hadn't foreseen the emergence of affinity groups and their subsequent cultures. We hadn't anticipated the level of discourse becoming profoundly deep and complex when compared to real life discussion and reflection. But in retrospect, it all makes sense -- especially when one examines the dynamics of adolescent behavior and the middle school experience. So, at the end of year one, we were able to hold up transcripts of discussions from different content areas as exemplars and we were able to provide anecdotal evidence of student engagement and investment.

By year two, we actually felt we were beginning to understand how to maximize the virtual aspects of the learning, rather than recreating real world situations and experiences. We enabled voice on the Foreign Language Island and realized there was more conversing going on. We concluded that this was due to the semblance of anonymity under which our students perform in Second Life. Although they rarely hesitate to disclose their identity to one and other, they still seem to operate under the guise of avatar -- their virtual identity -- and as much as they report that they connect with their avatar on some levels, they exhibit a greater sense of freedom to take risk. Erik Erickson refers to this as the "psychosocial moratorium," a learning space where the learner can take risks and the possibility of real world consequences are minimized.

As we concluded our second year -- the inevitable questions started to arise. How do we assess the learning? How do we substantiate the pedagogy which in turn will rationalize the fiscal investment?

This is not a new dilemma. Since the advent of educational technology, we have been wrestling with the issue of authentic assessment. Academic journals and educators' blogs and listserves are chock full of key phrases: If you value it, you must assess it! "Data driven" and everyone's favorite

-- NCLB (No Child Left Behind)...

My brain has been dancing around questions such as: are the skills developed within the participatory culture in Ramapo Islands assessable? If they are, is there a method that would remain authentic to the task? Would portfolios work? Student reflections? Or, should the concepts that have been explored virtually, the projects that are extending the knowledge, the rigor that has been injected by the students (who we underestimated in our curriculum design) -- be sufficiently evidenced in the kinds of assessment that are already in place? One might argue that if they have truly extended their understanding, and explored greater depths of a concept or an issue or a unit of study, the proof will be evidenced in traditional testing methods.

"Here is a report on European research on assessment: "Towards a Research Agenda on Computer-based Assessment." Although not specifically for 3D virtual worlds, the report provides some good resources for computer-based assessment." - Sabine Reljic

"I especially appreciated the work of Martin Ripley when he said, 'To meet the educational challenges of the 21st century assessment must embody the 21st century learning skills such as self-confidence, communication, working together and problem solving. In addition, assessment must support learners' analysis of their own learning and it must support constructivist approaches to learning.'" - Peggy Sheehy



Sabine Reljic / Willow Shenlin

Social Presence Effects

<http://tiny.cc/social218>

The Social Presence in Virtual Worlds group is a collaborative effort to explore and understand the effects of Social Presence on teaching and learning in desktop 3D virtual worlds. The group started on June 11, 2008. It is among the most active groups. Members discuss and share ideas, research and practice as well as brainstorm on how to enhance learning experiences via better use of the social presence affordances of Second Life.

Social Presence in Virtual Worlds offers several channels for collaboration: a discussion topic (Social Presence Effects), a brainstorm teaser (If Second Life as a presence machine is to the mind what cyclotrons are to physics, then...), a tool creation (SL instructor survey), web links (Resources), a bibliography (References), and an idea dump-site (Other questions and topics).

The most exciting collaboration has happened in the “Social Presence Effects” thread. Motivated by a list of research-supported measures, effects and behavior examples, and a few starting questions, educators have shared interesting insights on online pedagogy, in-world activities and interactive tools.

Measures of social presence and community have been shown to be strong predictors of satisfaction with learning, perceived learning and persistence. Kae (July 14) confirmed that her college’s online instructor certification program provides “a module on building learning community with a heavy emphasis on instructor social presence.” Quickly, the discussion addresses verbal and nonverbal communication. Instructors familiar with current online practices already use the listed verbal immediacy behaviors in asynchronous, synchronous, video and/or text-based only environments. The main question then focuses on nonverbal immediacy of the avatar: “Who uses the full repertoire of gestures?” “How are the gestures used,” “How do faculty train to use gestures,” and “Are the gestures really worth the effort?”

Discussions about the instructors’ backgrounds revealed that gaming experiences might help the educator to adapt to the technology faster and more smoothly, as well as to be more comfortable with establishing presence in SL (Abacus, July 1). Not completely satisfied with the early/late adopter versus the digital immigrant/native categories, Kae added the digital hippy category to the terminology she uses in faculty training. “Social presence and building community really make the

difference between an average online class and a great online class” (Kae, June 21).

When comparing social presence in SL with other VWs such as WoW, examples of educational activities were mentioned and organized in three social presence categories: beneficial, negative, neutral (Abacus Capalini, July 1). In this case, we define beneficial activities as activities initiated by the avatar (the student decides to bump the teacher); the negative activities are activities initiated by others addressing the avatar (the student is bumped by the teacher); the neutral activities are activities involving the students in creating notecards, sitting and listening, or waiting for everyone in class.

Current practices of instructor behaviors include bumping, use of hotkeys for frequent gestures, emoticons, calling by SL and/or RL names, and extensive use of current best online practices. Abacus Capalini (June 16) observed that his students responded to his immediacy behaviors by modeling him. Asking students to follow the instructor is another exercise that promotes a physical response, building social presence and a sense of individual immediacy (Kae, June 21). Bonnie Long (July 24) agreed with us all and shared her MA dissertation in which she reports that “as the weeks progressed, students’ use of affective indicators increased. This is in keeping with Stacey’s (2002) findings, that students’ social presence grew as the teacher modeled acceptable social presence factors.”

Some behaviors remain quite traditional, such as avatar orientation. Although not necessary in a simulated world, users have been observed to position their avatars f2f in a conversation or in class (instructor facing students). Research (Yee, N., Bailenson, J.N., Urbanek, M., Chang, F., Merget, D., 2007) and literature (McLuhan, 1964) report users’ tendencies to extend themselves in the media. Consequently, virtual eye contact and physical proximity reinforce a sense of social presence and immediacy in-world.

Other much less traditional behaviors, such as bumping raised a lot of interest. Barry Joseph (June 16) mentioned that Global Kids have been using the “bump-the-teacher” exercise with such great success that they were officially implementing it in the SL curriculum as a reinforcement activity and as an assessment tool. Based on the response of this discussion, we all started brainstorming on how to use this exercise for other purposes such as registering at conferences, course head-count (Kae, June 30), scaffolding lessons, or even treasure hunting clues. To prove that this is a perfect world, Azwaldo Villota (June 23) answered our thread with a “BumpLog HUD” for us

all to try in-world. The BumpLog does everything we wished for, and allows for rewards (as suggested by Paribus Habilis, June 18) and emails. Some members went bumping in-world to give the HUD a try. It worked wonderfully. The HUD is now used in classes, conferences and other events.

There are a few other benefits to the sense of immediacy and social presence that the bump exercise provides such as cyber-etiquette (bumping for education vs. bumping for grieving) and as a knowledge of in-world physics. Some RL laws apply (gravity, solid objects) while others don't (avatars are not hurt by falling). Also, although the personal attachment to the avatar is great, what happens to the avatar does not impact the real person physically (Abacus Capalini, June 18). This exercise provides newbies with a great sense of control of the software, hardware and 'emo-ware.' :)

Besides the BumpLog HUD, other tools have also been mentioned to help with social presence establishing activities, such as the Opinionator, Esme's MystiTool, MotorMouth (although now the SL LipSync takes care of it as default), the SLoodle classroom HUD, and Yadni's Emote chart.

Other concerns addressed time lapse and animation: would instructors who are not efficient with their hotkeys bother risking a pause just to find the right key for a gesture? How can we make our avatar more autonomous? The new SL1.20 provides lipsync which helps with a greater sense of immediacy compared to the old puppeteering feel. However, training on hotkey gestures and voice-triggered gestures still seem to be the current answer. Animation over-riders were also mentioned although they can be a problem due to the amount of bandwidth they require.

As we continue to discuss, brainstorm and experiment, more exciting tips and tricks will be exchanged. The Social Presence in Virtual Worlds group will soon meet at the Center for Social Presence, at Meadowbrook 48, 202, 22. Coming soon. Open to everyone.

- S.R.



Barry Joseph

What would you say to Congress about learning and virtual worlds?

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed>

On April 1st 2008, four individuals were invited to travel to Washington, D.C. and testify before a Congressional subcommittee about the current state and future of virtual worlds.

Inspired by the event, I decided to write my own testimony, asking Congress, in essence, to ask the virtual worlds industry the following:

- **How are children kept safe and empowered within virtual worlds?**
- **What are children learning within virtual worlds?**
- **Do the applications of virtual worlds contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable society or do they further exacerbate existing inequalities?**

From the perspective of learning and virtual worlds, what occurred on April 1st was historic, beginning a public discourse about the opportunities and challenges of this new medium.

It might have gone something like this:

Chairman Markey, Ranking Member Stearns, and Members of the Subcommittee, we at Global Kids are honored to have this opportunity to share our experiences as experts working with youth and virtual worlds.

To provide background, in 2006, following extensive research into the educational potential of virtual worlds, Global Kids became the first nonprofit to develop a dedicated space for conducting educational programming in Teen Second Life (TSL). Specifically, Global Kids is conducting intensive leadership programming for youth, bringing students from its New York-based programs into the space, and streaming the audio and video of major events into the world. This work has received significant funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, among others, and been conducted in partnership with many other organizations, including UNICEF, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the International Criminal Court.

I would like to begin my testimony with a quote from an earlier Congressional Subcommittee hearing that took place just over a half-century ago.

“Formerly, the child wanted to be like daddy or mommy. Now

they skip you, they bypass you. They want to be like Superman.”

This testimony from Dr. Fredric Wertham on the connections between comic books and juvenile delinquency, and his earlier publications on the matter, helped to stoke a national hysteria around the lurid dangers of this once new medium. While barely a decade old, more than 90% of children between the ages of six and eleven read comic books, as did over 80% of teenagers. Parents in the Cold War era, unsure how to handle a variety of new social forces, found a convenient scapegoat in the colorful and ubiquitous magazines. Wertham’s testimony helped the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency hold comic publishers’ feet to the fire and led not to new regulatory policies but a new industry-administered code of conduct that shaped comic books for over thirty years.

Generation after generation seems to go through its own “cycles of outrage,” whether with the waltz, pulp novels, comic books, rap music, or most recently with video games and online social networks. New mass media come and go, gaining relative acceptance or falling by the wayside, but concerns about the safety of children and regulations surrounding their freedoms never go away.

Virtual worlds, practically non-existent just a few years ago, are just the latest commercial media to be seen as “colonizing” the lives of youth, once again raising a variety of concerns about their impact. The growth of youth involvement with virtual worlds is predicted to surpass 50% over the next few years, so one can expect a number of concerns to be raised about virtual worlds that are similar to the mediums of the past—a threat to law and order, a threat to traditional learning, and a threat to traditional values.

However, unlike the comic books hearings of the early 50s, today’s hearing is driven by curiosity rather than outrage. This Subcommittee has risen above this cycle, not ignoring related concerns but seeking to begin a conversation about the medium itself, to gain a better understanding, and to mature the dialogue. For this the Subcommittee is to be commended.

Granted, while the Subcommittee’s position as curious outsider takes a stance that is neither booster nor detractor, there will inevitably be a number of bad jokes that minimize the importance or significance of this new medium. It is understandable to want to keep virtual worlds at a distance. It is understandable to feel uncomfortable when confronting a new medium that changes, for lack of a better phrase, our sense of self.

Perhaps the name of the popular virtual world at the subject

of today’s hearings, Second Life, has exacerbated this tension. But, when you speak to your child on the phone, are you hearing their “second voice?” No, you hear their voice, as they would claim that reproduction of voice as his or her own. The phone is not our “second voice” any more than photos are our “second image” or emails our “second handwriting.” That is YOU on the phone, in the photo, or through the email.

Virtual worlds are not escapist fantasies but a new way to extend our lives and our sense of self. Were they separate and apart from our lives, and, through extension, society, the task of this Subcommittee would be much easier. However, I would encourage the Subcommittee to keep their focus on the social impact of virtual worlds and move beyond the initial discomfort that leads to minimizing that impact.

For these are the questions that we are forced to ask ourselves today: how can virtual worlds expand our lives in new ways, what social affects arise as a result, and are these results desirable? We want to avoid the trap and sensationalistic trappings of previous cycles of outrage, yet it is still incumbent upon us to understand both the opportunities and dangers inherent in the rise of what is, in some ways, nothing more or less than the latest form of commercial media.

Both government and business tend to bristle at the occasional public call for regulation of popular culture, but Subcommittees like this have historically used the threat of such regulation to force industry to answer questions they might prefer to avoid and step up to the challenge with new, more responsible policies, both within individual companies and as an industry.

So at this, the first Congressional hearing on virtual worlds, what are the key questions that can be posed back to the virtual world industry and to those most familiar with its functions and social impact? I would propose three questions and offer my own responses.

Number 1: How are children kept safe and empowered within virtual worlds?

Not all virtual worlds are for children. In fact, the area designated for teenagers within Second Life is less than 5% of its total userbase. Yet the current growth area for virtual worlds is clearly for the teen and tween audience, with virtual worlds becoming the latest marketing tool to push new products and extend the brands of existing media. Is this form of unbridled and unheralded immersive advertising appropriate for younger children? What can we learn from current and previous regulations regarding children and advertising that

can inform how we view this role of virtual worlds? These are important questions to be explored.

At the same time, we are also concerned about youth in these spaces being safe from people who do not belong there, namely adults prowling for victims. All parents share concerns when their child leaves their side, whether to the playground or the internet. And when investigating virtual worlds we want to ask what role the official adults play as gate-keepers to their communities, putting in place steps to protect their charges from inappropriate content and contact.

At the same time, we should not fool ourselves that safety is an either or absolute, holding virtual worlds to an impossibly high standard that none can reach. No space can be perfectly safe. And for that reason it is important to also learn how youth are empowered within these online communities to protect themselves. How do youth learn what forms of personal information are permitted to be shared? How accessible are tools for contacting the authorities to place a report? How transparent are the results of these reports? A youth community educated about potential dangers and empowered to take action to protect themselves should be the goal of all youth-oriented virtual worlds.

Number 2: What are children learning within virtual worlds?

Are children learning powerful new forms of education uniquely available within virtual worlds or simply being trained to become a new generation of online consumers? We still speak of the digital divide -- describing the gap between those with and without access to the power of digital media -- but those like Henry Jenkins at M.I.T. are encouraging us to consider the Participatory Gap, arguing that debates around access often obscure the gap between those with and without the skills to navigate spaces where youth do more than just consume but also create and critique media content. Today, the argument goes, one cannot succeed as a student, a worker, or even a citizen, unless one has learned how to participate in this user-generated online landscape--whether on MySpace, YouTube, or Second Life--where one is shaping not just online content but the very world in which we live.

It is not a coincidence that today's hearing ends with the phrase "user-generated medium," for that is what distinguishes virtual worlds from earlier mass media and, as such, should define how we approach the question of what youth should be learning within these spaces. How do virtual worlds educate youth to participate within user-generated mediums?

The nature of this education, a stranger to most public school classrooms, is well described and advocated for by those like The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which has emerged as the leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education, and is supported by leaders like the MacArthur Foundation and the Microsoft Corporation. These skills include not simply core subject areas like English and Math, but also Media Literacy, Creativity and Innovation Skills, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills, Communication and Collaboration Skills, and more, skills well suited to be learned through the unique educational potential of virtual worlds and other digital media.

We need to look at virtual worlds and determine to what extent they offer tools and activities for members to participate in the shaping and/or building of their community and to what extent are those tools limited to selecting from pre-set choices, when available at all?

More specifically we can ask: Can members only buy objects or can they make their own? If they make their own can they also share them with, or sell them to, others? Are there appropriate vehicles for youth to express their opinions, about the real world or issues relevant to the virtual one? What opportunities exist for youth to create their own activities? Do tools exist to support collaboration with others?

The answers to these questions are more than theoretical. Global Kids has developed a highly refined process for using virtual worlds for this type of learning. Working with Teen Second Life, and now expanding to other virtual worlds like Whyville and There.com, Global Kids has explored the variety of ways that these virtual worlds can become powerful tools for youth to do such things as:

- **Curate a virtual museum exhibit about the Holocaust and its relationship to contemporary genocide.**
- **Construct a maze to teach their peers about the horrors of child sex trafficking.**
- **Produce animated movies about child soldiers in Northern Uganda, the role digital media plays in their lives, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**
- **Mentor youth to become peer educators around such issues as nuclear proliferation, gun control, and the crisis in Darfur.**
- **Launch social entrepreneurial projects that educate their peers about health.**

- Create art to express their opinions about international justice.
- Learn science through exploring, modifying and creating their own simulations.
- Build an immersive game to educate their peers about the history of medical experimentation on African-American male prisoners.
- Use both virtual worlds and related tools in the larger internet ecology to have their work seen and voices heard by audiences in the tens of thousands.

These are just a few examples that speak to the outcomes that can be achieved when the tools of virtual worlds are put in the hands of youth within a formalized learning system.

Number 3: Do the applications of virtual worlds contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable society or do they further exacerbate existing inequalities?

Noted scholar James Paul Gee often references a government study of computers labs in libraries that found that, while middle income communities had the social capital to take advantage of these new resources, the computers largely sat unused within lower income communities. Rather than bridge the digital divide or the participatory gap, these altruistic efforts further exacerbated them by providing more resources to those better supported to take advantage of them.

So as we challenge virtual world producers to make their spaces safe and empowering for youth, as well as valuable tools for learning 21st century learning skills, we need to also pay attention to who gets left out in the process and ask ourselves, as a society, what we can do about it.

Global Kids works with more privileged youth in Teen Second Life who have found their way into these virtual worlds, but we also develop programs in under-served New York City communities that seek out those with limited access. We create after school programs -- at our offices, in museums, and in schools -- that bring youth of color from low-income neighborhoods into virtual worlds and teach them both required digital literacies and how to use those skills to have a voice about social and global issues.

We also work with youth in other cities by offering professional development programs for educators, using digital tools to remotely run programs within their own settings, and support other organizations to leverage opportunities we have created within virtual worlds, bringing resources in

all three cases to underserved populations. For example, one Global Kids project works with youth within virtual worlds to develop their abilities to create sustainable projects that have a social mission; the most recent group of youth to participate in this project come from an all boys penitentiary in North Carolina, organized by their forward-thinking prison librarian.

But the work of one non-profit is not enough. What role should society play to ensure the inclusion of all youth in the powerful informal learning available through digital media like virtual worlds? What role can parents and religious and learning institutions play? How can government support and incentivize that involvement? These are questions that cannot be answered today but I hope today's hearing can help provide the context for doing so in the future.

Thank you for holding this hearing and for helping to continue to elevate the discussion, avoiding the emotional fears of the moment so we can focus on the real needs of the future. Please continue creating opportunities that call for the asking and addressing of important questions so together we can move, in an informed and inspired manner, towards taking the actions that will be required to support the use of virtual worlds for the benefit of society.

What questions would you ask Congress and why? What would you want them to know about learning and virtual worlds? For the next few weeks we invite you to take a few minutes and, addressing the subcommittee, post your responses below.

"The obvious question for me is: how much experience do the members have using virtual worlds?" -DK

"How can we keep the encroachment of commercialism from altering the learning experience and conversation in virtual worlds? Is it possible to carve out a portion of VWs as a pristine environment for creativity vs. hawking goods, services, and brand-driven opportunity?" -ShapingYouth



Rik Panganiban

What research question would you fund to generate data on learning and virtual worlds?

<http://tinyurl.com/rezed1>

The University of Southern California's Network Culture Project has invited Global Kids (GK) to participate in a small forum to discuss the compilation of an upcoming volume on virtual worlds, digital media and learning. The volume, supported by the MacArthur Foundation, is intended to define a collective vision for virtual worlds and to outline a multi-year research agenda.

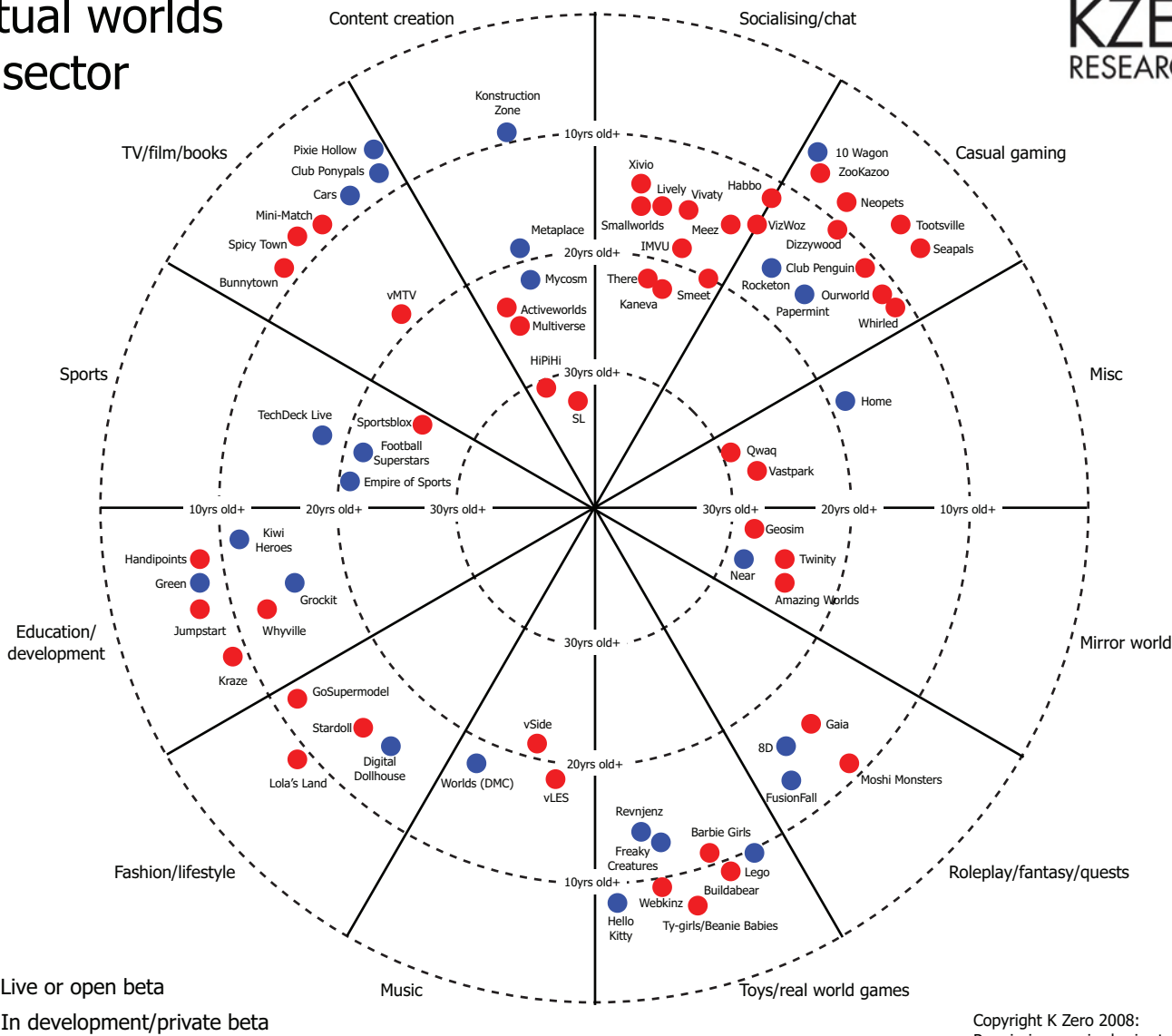
To prepare for the meeting, we invited members of the RezEd community to weigh in and contribute to what GK could bring to the table.

Key questions that emerged amongst the brainstorming included, but are in no way limited to, the following:

- Can we identify differences in engagement by age within educational uses of virtual worlds, for both learner and educator?
- What effect does immersive learning in a virtual setting have on learners? Are current eLearning pedagogical practices sufficient for this genre of learning or is a new theory of instructional design required to account for the affordances of immersive learning?
- What effect does immersive learning in a virtual setting have on the educator/learner relationship? How does this affect the nature of learning, the state of learning institutions, and role of learning institutions within society?
- What are the constraints and affordances for learning tied to different sized virtual worlds?
- Engagement has turned out to be a very slippery construct for evaluating student learning in the classroom setting. What other constructs will work well in studying learning in virtual worlds to supplement engagement so that we can gain a more nuanced understanding of when and how learning takes place in these spaces?
- How does a sense of presence, (sometimes referred to as telepresence), facilitated by a sense of place provided by the 3D environment and the sense of embodiment provided by driving an avatar, effect student engagement in learning?
- How do instructor-avatar's social presence and immediacy behaviors influence students' participation and promote peer-to-peer collaboration among students? What characteristics do a 3D virtual environment provide to support successful social presence efforts? (e.g. Shared space, Immediacy, Interactivity, Persistence, Community) How do you measure them? What new or revamped pedagogies would a "mediated social presence" foster?
- Virtual world education naturally leads to considerations of cultural differences in learning environments. As virtual classrooms become more globalized, how does this influence the role of teacher as facilitator, and how does this influence the co-construction of the learning agenda?
- Does immersive education in virtual worlds offer a tangible, recordable, empirically verifiable advantage over teaching face to face and in the traditional online learning management systems?
- What are the best ways to support and manage an expanded learning community that can include classroom teachers, students, experts, mentors, and more all interacting toward a shared goal, i.e., how to best leverage the social capacity of virtual worlds across cultures?
- In terms of preparing students for participatory democracy, how does the "reifying power" of a immersive, embodied, and social virtual world impact learning about the real life environment for policymaking? To what extent does the virtual world experience serve as a tool to teach the constructedness and situatedness of real life?

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Virtual worlds by sector



Our friends at Kzero were kind enough to share their recently released radar graph showing virtual worlds by sector. This graph illustrates how major virtual worlds are categorized in to groups including, education/development, socializing/chat, and casual gaming worlds. The bands reflect age groups with red dots referring to live virtual worlds and blue dots indicating those virtual worlds that are still in development.

Global Kids Second Life Curriculum



Global Kids' simple and comprehensive Second Life Curriculum comprises over 160 lesson plans focused on acquiring the skills to use Second Life. The curriculum is designed as a self-paced tutorial that can be incorporated into any formal learning environment.

The curriculum is available at RezEd.org as a free download via the social network for those interested in learning and virtual worlds.

Components of the curriculum can be used as hand-outs to develop specific Second Life-specific skills or within a broader educational program designed to teach such subjects as science, filmmaking or literature.



- Aligned with National Learning Standards
- McRel Learning Standards
- 21st Century Student Outcomes
- Comprehensive
- Nine sequential levels
- Dozens of stand-alone modules
- 163 total 'missions'
- Flexible
- Learn on your own or train others
- Adapt into your new or existing curriculum
- Print hand-outs for single lessons
- Free
- Available under Creative Commons license
- Download at RezEd.org/group/GKslcurriculum

For those interested in delving deeper into Second Life education, Global Kids offers a range of professional development services that can be customized to meet your individual needs. Topics include direct instruction in how to use Second Life, as well as Best Practices for using Second Life in your educational programs and assistance for adapting the SL Curriculum to your audience. For more information regarding professional development opportunities please contact info@globalkids.org.