

Virtual Worlds - Jump In!

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Primary school students now engage with virtual worlds such as Club Penguin, Tootsville and Whyville. Teens are collaborating with each other around the globe creating new environments within Second Life. What or where are these places you might ask? They are virtual environments that exist on computer servers and an individual may become an inhabitant of that world and participate through an avatar that they create through their computer at home. Some of the virtual worlds are more educational game oriented, while others such as Second Life have a real economy and are used by industry professionals, politicians and educational institutions. Second Life was created by Linden Lab and, since opening to the public in 2003, Second Life has grown to involve nearly 10 million residents from around the globe. It provides a safe and unique environment for cooperative work and simulation, allowing students to practice skills and create new works and interact on the global stage. Over the next ten years the digital natives who are now in elementary school and have grown up on virtual worlds and interactive environments, will be entering into the halls of higher education. The University of Kansas, in providing students with the latest in technology and preparing for the incoming digital natives, now owns two 16-acre "Islands," or server space, in the virtual world of Second Life.



KU's Department of Art Island is a 16-acre virtual extension of the Department of Art in which students from around the world can attend courses and interact with professional artists. Art Island features a performing arts center/lecture hall, several open air studios, a film production area, an interactive gallery of student works, and an extension of the KU student-run Red Door Gallery in Kansas City, Mo. In April, the Department of Art will host its first online International Convergent Media festival featuring works by KU art students and others around the globe, with live interactive lectures and performance art experiences. These events will all take place on Art Island in Second Life and be streamed across the department's Web channel. The Spencer Museum of Art received an IMLS grant to purchase their island in Second Life. The Museum will use the virtual environment to extend their exhibits to a global audience with interactive features and activities not possible within their physical space. Education faculty will also be utilizing classroom spaces on the Spencer Island. The beauty of Second Life is that those classroom spaces are not your typical classroom.



Everyone has the ability to create and build in Second Life. Because of this creative freedom, teachers may design and build their ideal teaching environment. Biology teachers can build cells in which students can sit and interact with the very cell they are studying. English teachers may design the villages from a book they are reading or take their students to see a live performance of a Shakespearean play performed at the virtual Globe Theatre by the Second Life Shakespeare Group. The international access to the Second Life world makes possible collaborative environments between students and faculty around the world.



This is a very exciting time in education. I encourage everyone to make an avatar in a virtual world and jump in.