

Engaging Youth with a New Medium: The Potentials of Virtual Worlds

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Part of what makes working in the field of youth media so interesting and engaging is the process of exploring different media. Observing how youth act and react in relation to different media and supporting their investigation into the possibilities of new expressive media forms has been a rewarding experience as a youth media professional at *Global Kids*. For the past five years, *Global Kids* (GK) has been exploring what it means to bring youth media projects into the online world—with fascinating finds.

GK began with online dialogues and helped produce and run a website where youth around the globe could dialogue and share opinions on current events. Soon after, GK began working on a serious gaming initiative, giving teens the opportunity to produce issue-based online video games. We soon discovered the virtual world of *Second Life*, which brought together the strengths of so many different online technologies impossible for us to ignore. *Second Life* (SL) is a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by approximately 6,240,600 people from around the globe. SL provides a rich virtual environment for teens across the globe to commune (*Teen Second Life*), which rolls together 3-D object creation, programming, social networking, gaming, chat and multimedia. For educators and media practitioners, *Second Life* is a playground with limitless possibilities.

Looking to understand where these possibilities could lead, we launched *Camp GK*, our pilot program in *Teen Second Life*, in the summer of 2006. Over four weeks, 15 teens from around the world spent three hours a day, five days a week, participating in interactive, experiential workshops about pressing global issues—all in a virtual space. Over the course of the program, the teens picked a topic of concern—in this case, child sex trafficking—and built a maze to educate their online community to inspire them to take action on this issue. In its first eight weeks, the content-rich maze was visited by 2,500 teens, of which 450 donated money to an international organization committed to eradicating this global crime against children.

After *Camp GK*'s success, we felt we had learned a good deal about virtual media and using *Second Life* and wanted to share this knowledge with other educators entering this space.

When wrapping up the project, we spent time documenting what we thought were best practices in various areas, from general program structure to workshop design and everything in between. We've since distributed these practices to those in the *Second Life* educational community and beyond, and continue to spread these practices to youth media professionals through publication and outreach opportunities (download a PDF here: <http://www.holymeatballs.org/pdfs/BestPractices.pdf>). The practices that follow outlines ways youth media professionals (especially those from a distance education perspective) can use virtual spaces such as *Second Life* in their work.

Best practices for working in Second Life

General tips that apply to work in the space

- What happens in Second Life stays in Second Life

Especially in the non-profit arena, it is critical to show your work to other programs and funders. Unless you document your virtual work, no one outside of Second Life will ever know your program even existed. However, SL offers a myriad of methods for digital documentation. You can capture chat logs, blog, take photos, and record video and audio. If you're working with teens, in *Teen Second Life* (the dedicated 13-17 year old space), this becomes even more important as other adults can not visit your online space because it is restricted to background checked adults and teens.

- Create multiple places of meaning

In the real world, a *Global Kids* program always meets in the same classroom and the setting does not vary. *Second Life*, if you have the space, allows you to create a myriad of locations each with their own purposes. A workshop in SL can start in the GK Clubhouse, move to the factory, shift to the cloud platform, transfer to the dance club, and conclude at the campfire. Each location can be associated with different types of activities, norms and behaviors. For example, in the *Global Kids* second life program, youth start at the GK Clubhouse. Teen visitors expect interactive activities in the factory section, fun and interaction in the dance club arena, and processing and closure around the campfire. Establishing an association between each modality and a specific location offers both structure and signs for work, activism, and play.

Best practices for bringing a youth development model into Teen Second Life

Global Kids employs an asset based youth development model in the real world, and found that Second Life allow this kind of progressive pedagogy to manifest in new ways

- Build, build, build!

Create as many opportunities as possible for teens to express themselves through building. *Second Life* is all about building so it is almost hard not to do this. Encourage youth to "build" the facilities and material required for the program (the meeting rooms, the workshop materials, t-shirts for the program, for example). Incorporate youth to build the activities (e.g. build and act out a scene in a life-size diorama, create a billboard about injustice)—since forming items they can use creates a sense of ownership, which increases retention. Use these "builds" as a way for teens to centralize and demonstrate what they are learning, and as a way to share their knowledge and skills with the wider community around them.

- Don't just build; design and manipulate avatars

Create opportunities for identity play and self-expression through avatar creation and manipulation. Avatars are an internet user's representation of oneself, whether in the form of a 3-D model (easily made in Second Life) or a 2-D picture used on internet forums and on-line communities. Explore existing avatar choices in SL to bring up issues of gender and racial representation, or use non-human avatars to address issues of discrimination.

- Think globally, act locally

If you're structuring your program as a distance education model that draws from the larger *Teen Second Life* (TSL) community, the teens will be from diverse global locations. However, they experience TSL as their shared community. Strategizing approaches for effective education and advocacy will challenge teens to think creatively and critically. It will appeal to their desire to have their voices heard, make a difference, and develop their leadership abilities. Doing this also means the programmatic impact moves outside the scope of just the participants to a larger community.

Best practices in workshop design and facilitation in Second Life

No matter what kind of pedagogical approach you're taking, there are a number of

things that can be done to strengthen session-based learning in the virtual environment

- *Use real world content when addressing real world issues*

Discussing substantive issues in a place that feels surreal can make these issues feel distant. Use photos or a guest speaker, anything “from the other side,” that feels real to give real issues weight in the virtual community.

- *Don't fear multiple communication channels*

In a distance learning program structure, multiple channels can be used to add social nuance, organize various modes of communication in a more manageable form, and leverage teen abilities to multi-task. Use a public IM chat for group conversation and private IMs to communicate one-on-one with participants in SL.

- *Make your space have its own culture*

Just like the Web, *Second Life*—in both its teen and adult versions—tends to be shaped by a libertarian, anarchic culture which cuts against the grain of *Global Kids'* organized, substantive, and deliberative activities. In essence, we challenge this larger culture by creating a counter culture. We establish clear guidelines, boundaries and expectations in SL, which has led to a very high retention rate and a strong sense of ownership in the virtual community.

- *Be flexible!*

Flexibility is the name of the game in the SL environment. Be prepared to change directions or adjust goals by paying attention to what works. As the tools, social practices and creative uses in a space like this rapidly evolves, it becomes more critical to be reflective and realistic with goals.

The above list of best practices is a result of reflections from *Global Kids'* first extended project in *Second Life*. Since then, we had another year of holding two full scale in-person after-school programs that utilize SL to create *machinima* (animated film made using a video game engine) and other socially conscious games, as well as additional distance education programs and youth led workshops and events. All of these experiences are important learning processes and as youth media professionals, we must continue to share best practices as our project experiences grow and develop.

There's no doubt that the learning curve for working with *Second Life* is a steep one. But so much groundbreaking work is already being done, and there's a lot that can be learned from using virtual on-line communities such as *Second Life*.

I encourage anyone interested in experimenting with this new, exciting and powerful medium to sign up for a free *Second Life* account (<http://secondlife.com>), attend some of the educational and arts related events, and engage the incredibly dynamic individuals that work in the space.

Rafi Santo is the Online Leadership Program Associate for Global Kids. To learn more about Global Kids' work in Second Life, please visit www.HolyMeatballs.org or contact info@globalkids.org.

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