

# Meet the New

In Teen Second Life, librarians can leap tall buildings in a single bound and save kids from boring assignments—all before lunch

By Kelly Czarnecki and Matt Gullett

**G**abe (not his real name) was a troubled teenager, drug addicted and given to frightening outbursts of uncontrollable rage. Video and computer games provided some solace and led him to discover the 3-D online environment known as Teen Second Life (TSL). Upon entering the virtual world, Gabe transformed into the avatar Tocharaeh Wake, a slightly taller and more muscular on-screen representation of himself. He told us that he felt comfortable in TSL, where you can meet people and it doesn't matter what you really look like, where you can be "something other than a bum." Now an established TSL citizen, Gabe is running his own business in the virtual world, Spider Clothing, a Gothic line that he designs and sells to his online peers.

Gabe is among 40,000 teenagers who inhabit TSL, a virtual environment geared just for youth, ages 13 to 17. Created in 2005 by Linden Lab, TSL is an offshoot of the San Francisco-based company's popular Second Life (SL) ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)), a 3-D world for adults that has attracted more than a million residents since it was launched in 2003. While dismissed by some as just another massive, multiplayer, online role-playing game (MMORPG), SL lacks the dragon-slaying quests and other defined objectives typical of MMORPGs. It is instead a multiuser virtual environment or MUVE, where the experience is solely determined by its users. If residents, say, choose to build a boat in the sky or put a shopping mall under water, they can.



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# You



The social appeal of SL is huge, especially for teens, developmentally inclined, as they are, to seek out the company of their peers. As in the adult grid, you can meet friends or make new ones in TSL, hang out, listen to music, and even shop, using a special currency called Linden dollars. Fooling with your appearance is a blast—for kids and adults alike. Don a tulle miniskirt and transparent butterfly wings, cast your entire face in glowing acid green, or trick out your figure to wildly imaginative specs, residents can go crazy with their virtual selves—and do. Wings or not, everyone has the ability to fly. Offering a creative, social outlet and relative freedom in a safe environment (TSL's community standards, including no vulgar language or sexual content, are strictly enforced), it's a veritable utopia where youngsters are interacting in unique and surprisingly meaningful ways.

One teenager, Lucy Figtree (her screen name), recalled her experience in Camp Global Kids, a free summer event conducted in TSL by Global Kids, a New York-based nonprofit organization dedicated to getting urban youth interested in public policy and international issues. "We built a maze in Camp Global Kids against child sex trafficking," she says on the MacArthur Foundation Spotlight Web site. "We all worked hard, had a great opening, and raised a lot of money." (Linden dollars translate into actual bucks).

A Web presence that helps teens develop positive identities, take charge of their lives, and assume leadership roles as world citizens? As librarians, we knew a good thing when we saw one. Our institution, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) in Charlotte, NC, is seriously dedicated to teen outreach, and SL appeared to dovetail perfectly with those efforts.

So in fall 2006, PLCMC and the Alliance Library System (ALS) in East Peoria, IL, announced a formal partnership to create Eye4You Alliance, an island within the teen grid. By setting up shop in the virtual sphere, we hoped to establish a dedicated space for youth that was both informative and

**From left: Dayton Ra, avatar of Jean Gardner, young adult librarian, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL); entryway of TSCPL in Teen Second Life (TSL); at left, Chaser Brody, Peggy Sheehy's avatar, and two of her students on Ramapo Island; a dragon created by TSL resident Kurenai Meiji; in late December, giant holiday icons descended on Suffern Middle School's library.**



interactive and could function as a bridge to other youth organizations. ALS had already pioneered virtual library services in Infoland, which they created for SL's adult space in April 2006. With hopes of replicating that success, Eye4You Alliance went live in October 2006.

While still in the process of terraforming—shaping our virtual landscape—we're gearing up a full roster of offerings for spring and winter 2007. There will be classes on how to run an SL business, among other topics, and book discussions, as well as opportunities for teens to tell their own stories. Eye4You Alliance has already attracted partners, such as the New York-based Lower East Side Girls Club, which will sponsor a youth-mentoring program, and publisher Random House, who will help kick off author "appearances" and other book-related events. Special emphasis has been given to workshops that will help teens explore a variety of virtual-world skills, from scripting to designing buildings for the island.



Teen participation, after all, is central to our mission as young adult librarians. With Eye4You Alliance, the overarching goal is for kids to create the programs and services, as opposed to simply consuming what we offer. Recently, we launched a recruiting campaign, both in-world and in RL (real life), for teen designers. During one open call, an avatar named Jackson Widget approached us. Pulling out terraforming maps from his portfolio, the teenage resident impressed us with his vision for our space—he knew where the hills and water should be. We hired Jackson on the spot.

Although we're proud of our early steps in shaping TSL, we're certainly not the first group of educators to inhabit this virtual world. At about the same time as the public library partnership for Eye4You Alliance Island was announced, Suffern Middle School in Rockland County, NY, was relocating its virtual presence, three islands named Suffern, Rockland, and Ramapo, from the main SL grid to the teen grid. While it was initially easier to construct the project in the adult space (there are fewer restrictions than on the teen grid), it was time to share the environment with its intended audience: the school's eighth graders.

Leading the project is Peg Sheehy, Suffern's instructional technology facilitator. Sheehy, who is close to becoming a certified media specialist, worked with kids throughout November 2006, getting them comfortable in-world, getting them started creating their avatars, and learning how to move and use creation tools. As one might imagine, the kids took to this like fish to water. As for the adults? "The key is baby steps," she advises. Administrators' reservations about student safety were easily addressed: access to the islands is restricted to Suffern's eighth graders and teachers, who are subject to TSL's background checks. Any resident needing assistance can always tap one of the "Lindens," TSL staff who are easily found roaming the beat in-world.

"This is also a social network. The same rules for behavior in school apply here," adds Sheehy. "I'd better not see under-



## Get a (Second) Life

**Sign up and get acquainted** with the virtual world ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)). It's free.

**Visit the Second Life Education Wiki**

([www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second\\_Life\\_Education\\_Wiki](http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki)) to see what your peers are doing.

**Learn the cost** of purchasing and maintaining an island in SL ([secondlife.com/community/land-islands.php](http://secondlife.com/community/land-islands.php)). Can't afford it? Partner with someone who can give you land space to try out for free.

**Create a proposal**, including supportive materials (such as this article), to present to your administration.

**Join SL's Educators Working with Teens mailing list**

([lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educatorsandteens](http://lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educatorsandteens)).

**Contact us.** While we're still finding our way in TSL, we're willing to share and learn from you, as well.

**From left: Students inspect Suffern Middle School's schedule**  
**Above, from left: teen avatars David Gall (with spiky 'doo)**  
**and Ben (with the green face)**

**Opposite page: students posing in front of Suffern's geo gallery**

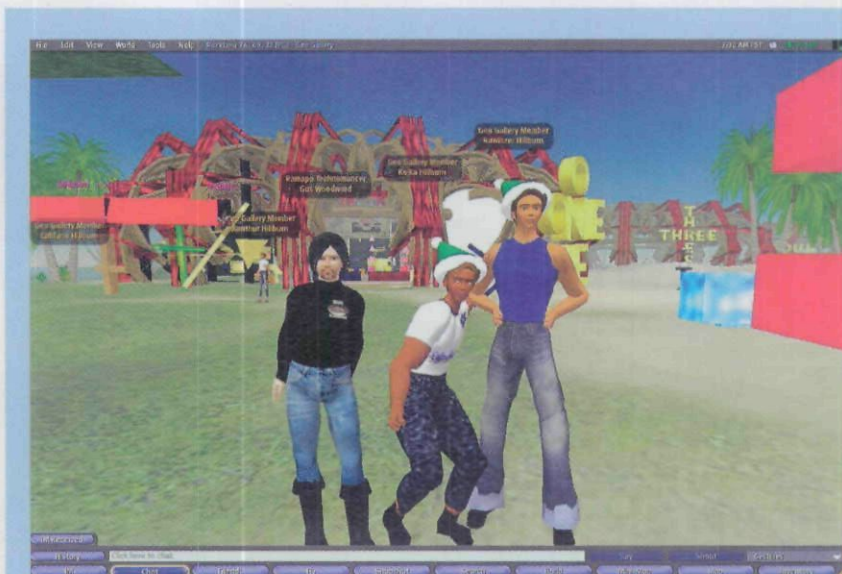
wear hanging out of your pants.” Treating others—and their avatars—with mutual respect is another requirement.

To achieve teacher buy-in, Sheehy has moved quickly to establish relevancy to the curriculum. A social studies class examining immigration, for example, is building a virtual Ellis Island, complete with the Statue of Liberty and Lower East Side tenements. And when a math teacher approached Sheehy, asking for help with his geometry unit, she proposed a “geo gallery” of 3-D rays, angles, and other concepts, all rendered by students. “Imagine walking around an intersecting line,” says Sheehy. A “wellness” class at Suffern in particular lends itself to a virtual exercise. “How much can you learn about body image if you can go in and create your own physique?” ponders Sheehy. “Think about the introspection [it will inspire in kids]. I might choose to be a different gender, a different race.”

High-tech teaching, to be sure, but Sheehy is quick to point out that the initiative also calls on traditional literacy skills—click on select photographs within the Ellis Island project, for instance, to reveal topical essays, which every student was required to write.

“We hope to give kids a literary experience,” says Jean Gardner, a young adult librarian who spearheads the TSL project sponsored by her institution, the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL) in Topeka, KS. The library recently closed the deal with Linden, laying down \$900, with a \$150 monthly maintenance fee for the island, which they’ve christened “Oz.” TSCPL is partnering with Hope Street Academy, a local charter school, which will provide a pilot group of 15 to 30 high school students to participate in the TSL project, beginning this month. Gardner says Hope Street administrators were open to the leading-edge initiative, hoping it would inspire their at-risk students.

Gardner admits that all this stuff is pretty new to her, as well. An SL newbie, she acknowledges the steep learning curve ahead of her, but nonetheless is starting to find her legs in the virtual landscape. “You just have to sit down and play with it,” she says. Thus far, the biggest obstacle for her has been the technology. Initially, Gardner couldn’t even access SL, until acquiring the proper video card for her workstation. So users need to know the system’s requirements ([secondlife.com/corporate/sysreqs.php](http://secondlife.com/corporate/sysreqs.php)). The software is also updated on a regular basis, which necessitates reimaging every computer running SL each time you load the new version. And since SL’s main mode of communication



## Take a (Second) Look

Want more on Second Life? Check out the following resources:

**Global Kids.** Best practices related to a youth development project in Second Life focuses on human rights, among other issues. [www.holymeatballs.org/2006/10/sl\\_best\\_practices\\_for\\_educatio.html](http://www.holymeatballs.org/2006/10/sl_best_practices_for_educatio.html).

**Eye4You Alliance blog.** Track our progress through our Web journal. [eye4youalliance.youthtech.info](http://eye4youalliance.youthtech.info).

**InfoIsland.** Alliance Library System’s pioneering presence on SL’s adult grid, offering a full range of virtual library services. [infoisland.org](http://infoisland.org).

**Second Life: The Official Guide.** A hard-copy reference by Michael Rymaszewski on the basic facts of Second Life (Sybex, 2006).

**Suffern Middle School blog.** Catch the latest on the upstate New York school’s virtual presence, including images of the geo gallery. [rampoislands.blogspot.com](http://rampoislands.blogspot.com).



is chat, that might present a problem for many schools and libraries, which commonly block that capability on their computers. At the very least, you’ll need to convince your administrators and the guys in IT. Despite these issues, Gardner and other proponents, including us, believe TSL is a worthwhile platform in which to serve and engage teens.

Moving on, Gardner reiterates her interest in literary-based projects, “which include fantasy books, of course,” another idea that has recently popped into her head. Brainstorming ideas for a medieval marketplace in one moment and recreating the ecosystem of Walden Pond in the next, her enthusiasm is so out there, it’s contagious. “There are no limits to what we can do,” she says. “Just imagine the possibilities.”

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