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Jewish Learning on the MUVE: The 3D Web, A New Frontier in the 21st Century Landscape

by Caren N. Levine

Virtual, Immersive Worlds

Virtual environments, specifically multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs), have been around for a while. MUVEs and their predecessors are commonly thought to be the domain of online gaming communities or esoteric science fiction-like academic projects. Recently, however, there has been a cultural shift in how these immersive worlds are perceived.

There is increasing buzz about these environments in the blogosphere and in more traditional media, especially in the business and education sectors. Cultural artifacts of virtual environments are bleeding into the vocabulary of so-called "real life." Stuffed animals are marketed in concert with an online community (Webkinz). Television commercials urge tweens and teens to personalize and accessorize their presence in online activities through the creation of avatars (graphic representations of individuals). They are also invited to interact through their avatar by joining a virtual world (Zwinky).

The *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and other mainstream publications publish articles that describe commerce and entertainment in the metaverse, Second Life (www.secondlife.com). Reuters has a bureau chief posted there. Major corporations and institutions such as Coldwell Banker, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, NASA, and Xerox are using Second Life to extend and augment their work through online activities. Universities and libraries are staking out territory in Second Life, as are governments; Sweden recently established a virtual embassy. The MacArthur Foundation sponsors events to promote philanthropy, and volunteers for the American Cancer Foundation raised significant real world dollars through participation in virtual walkathons.

Similarly, there appears to be a gain in momentum in certain education circles as educators increasingly engage and experiment with different Internet-based tools and online learning environments. A core group of educators is actively building sites for learning and exploration on Second Life, including college campuses, museums, libraries, and classroom teachers. Organizations such as the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), the New Media Consortium, and the American Library Association have established presences on Second Life in the form of resources, virtual meeting spaces, social gatherings, presentations, and conferences.

Educational Activities on the 3D Web

It is probably more helpful to think of these environments as "immersive" rather than "virtual." A rich visual, audio, and textual environment provides opportunities to create more textured and perhaps deeper connections within the environment. Social interactions become amplified. In a space like Second Life, participants are both consumers and producers of the environment. They interact with objects, and, most importantly, with other participants. These sites are highly social and the experiences – and learning – are real. Participants are represented by avatars and can express aspects of their personality through clothing and accessories. Participants befriend one another and join groups according to specific interests. There are commercial activities in Second Life, like shopping and real estate, but it is possible to navigate through the world without spending money, virtual or real.

A number of educational activities and events make use of the Second Life environment. These include but are not limited to:

- Broadcast media such as film, radio, television, and video
- Community socials to meet with others with similar interests
- Creative writing and literature
- Data visualizations and simulations
- Design projects
- E-learning courses and workshops
- Exhibits and galleries on art, history, photography, and specific content areas
- Historic recreations and reenactments
- Inter-cultural collaborations
- Language learning
- Performing arts, including dance, music, and theater
- Philanthropy
- Presentations and conferences
- Professional development and skills development
- Role-playing
- Scavenger hunts
- Simulation games and training
- Social action projects
- Tutorials
- Videoconferencing

Jewish Life on Second Life

There is an emerging Jewish presence in virtual environments. Second Life, for example, is home to a virtual *Kotel* and *Torah* learning center, Temple Beit Israel synagogue, a Jewish historical museum, a Holocaust Memorial Museum, an artistic representation of a *mikvah*, a Judaic gift shop, a cafe and Jewish art space, and Ir Shalom – a Jewish city. People regularly gather to learn and discuss *Torah* and gather inworld to acknowledge Jewish ritual in the real world. The Second Life synagogue held a *sukkah*-building contest and sponsors book readings and other cultural events. The Second Life Synagogue Hebrew School is home to emerging online courses, such as an *Aleph-Bet* Class for Beginners.

A recent genealogy exhibit featured resources from JewishGen, the online Jewish genealogy project. *2Lifemagazine: The Jewish Magazine in Second Life* (www.2lifemagazine.com) highlights activities and issues of identity related to being Jewish as expressed in the virtual world. There is also a full-scale reconstruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, created by the cantor/rabbi of the OPEN Jewish Congregation Klal Israel of Holland.

These projects are the work of individuals who have taken it upon themselves to create Jewish culture in Second Life. This in itself is noteworthy. Individuals design and create Jewish artifacts and activities with which they actively engage and invite others to join as well. They are creating a deeply personalized environment on their own, without impetus from traditional institutions, to explore their Jewish identities with others from around the world who happen to interact online. It is interesting that these forms of expression are articulated in traditional metaphors of Jewish community.

The Jewish community is growing, both in terms of Jews who register and in terms of Jewish activities.

Virtual Environments – Real Jewish Learning

So how might Jewish learning be conceived in a virtual environment? Below are a few examples of what Jewish learning might look like. Imagine:

- Students who are home-schooled in Jewish studies meeting with peers from all over the world and studying together
- Twinned communities in Israel and the Diaspora working on collaborative projects together and learning about each other on a more individual basis

- Jewish learners of all ages enrolling in inworld courses on Jewish text, history, and culture
- Hebrew language learners navigating through a virtual Israel
- Educators taking part in a variety of professional development opportunities, formal and informal
- Engaging in social action projects and philanthropic activities that impact real life
- Holding inworld reunions and activities for campers and for Israel trip participants that extend their experiences and maintain relationships
- Organizing readings by Jewish authors, along with small group discussions and ongoing book clubs
- Attending virtual conferences that are held inworld, and hybrid sessions in conjunction with real world conferences
- Attending concerts and other Jewish cultural events that are broadcast to participants around the world
- Conducting inworld meetings of educational organizations
- Sponsoring online social activities to connect Hillel members and other college students
- Creating a virtual Israeli Embassy and a virtual *Sochnut* (Jewish Agency) to share resources about Israel
- Exploring historic recreations and reenactments of significant Jewish events and personalities

These environments can be used to extend and amplify the work of established Jewish educational institutions. They also support grassroots, do-it-yourself venues for Jewish learning.

Conclusion

There are challenges, to be sure. On Second Life, for instance, adults and teens are, for the most part, segregated by age for security reasons, although there ways around these restrictions for educational purposes. There is a steep learning curve. Creating rich learning environments can be time-consuming. Communications can be clumsy and the technology erratic. There are aspects of these environments that would not be considered appropriate for many people.

In some ways, open participant-driven virtual environments like Second Life are still wild frontiers. It is anticipated, however, that as these landscapes mature, they will become more normative and accessible environments for robust learning.

The strength of these communities lies in the vision and good will of their participants. Imagine the talent, creativity, and collaboration that can be fostered online and inworld for Jewish learning.

Learn More

- Chronicle of Higher Education: Wired Campus Blog: Second Life (<http://chronicle.com/wiredcampus/category/Second-Life>)
- Educational Uses of Second Life Video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOFU9oUF2HA)
- Educational Uses of Second Life Wiki (<http://slededucation.wikispaces.com/educationaluses>)
- Global Kids Online Leadership Program (www.globalkids.org)
- Greater IBM and Second Life Video Introduction (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ly4LlxzGZM)
- Horizon Project (www.nmc.org/horizon)
- Second Life Education Wiki (www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki)
- Second Life Education Wiki: Working with Teens (www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life:_Educators_Working_with_Teens)
- SLED Picayune (<http://sledpicayune.blogspot.com>)
- Suffern Middle School in Second Life (<http://rampoislands.blogspot.com>)

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