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“Adolescent Literature and Second Life: Teaching Young Adult Texts in the Digital World”

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Introduction

The proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies, digital media and home entertainment/gaming systems (among other technological developments) have revolutionized the students who sit in our classes, the tools and methodologies we use to share our disciplines and the pedagogies we practice within our professional environments. This is not earth-shattering news. Educators know all about (neo)millennial students and their multi-tasking, collaborative learning styles.

We educators, however, tend to focus our attention on our students' multiple intelligences and oftentimes neglect our own pedagogical and professional growth. Technologies must not merely involve our students; we educators must transform and grow along with our students as these digital tools and toys continue to infiltrate our classes. It's time to adopt and adapt!

One powerful technological method of keeping current is teaching literature in a digital environment. This article discusses teaching the school subject, English, to young adults and adolescents using the 3-dimensional, virtual reality environment called [Second Life™](#)

Background

In general, teaching and learning have become collaborative, social, individuated (in a just-in-time, just-in-place sense) and digital. Textbooks, novels, articles, essays, videos, and so on — all the texts of our discipline — are now available online and in digital formats. Frankly, English is no longer solely words or images on paper, film on reels, or movies on DVDs. Teaching today's digital humanities has transformed our discipline into a more collaborative, interdisciplinary and interactive professional arena.

Ubiquitous technologies have strongly encouraged us to redefine what we teach and how we teach it. Traditionally, English instruction has been considered a solitary enterprise with the teacher and his or her students in one classroom, studying a set curriculum using traditional and proven pedagogies. Today, however, many English teachers embrace the proliferation of digital worlds and use these platforms to teach the content, skills and dispositions of our discipline.

Thomas Benton explains:

[T]he digital humanities is also about the merger of scholarship from multiple disciplines with new tools for computation, visualization, and communications, often to create interactive projects that can appeal to people at varied levels of interest and expertise. The digital humanities have already begun to redefine what constitutes scholarship, authority, teaching, and merit in academe. (<http://tinyurl.com/6ne29c>)

The time is ripe to examine what we teach and how we might teach it. Changing cultures encourage changing pedagogies and the digital humanities (especially as taught in Second Life) are transforming our discipline and our profession.

Before we delve into the realm of Second Life and how young adult literature is taught within this three-dimensional virtual reality environment, we should spend time defining our terms and making sense of what is a highly contentious field of literary inquiry before we merge it with a discussion of cutting-edge pedagogical technology.

Betwixt and Between: What Do We Mean By YAL?

Scholarly researchers and critical theorists have long interrogated children's literature as a genre worthy of analysis and critique. Only recently, perhaps as recently as the mid-20th Century, did young adult literature (YAL) come to be recognized by some (but not all) critics, scholars and readers as a valid literary genre. Many literary scholars subsume YAL under the umbrella of "Children's Literature" — rejecting any significant demarcation between the two categories. Still other organizations, critics and scholars work diligently to promote young adult literature and its burgeoning scholarly achievements. [For further information promoting YAL see the following websites: [The ALAN Review](#), [YALSA](#), [Annette Wannamaker](#), and [Roberta Seelinger-Trites](#).

My purpose for this essay is not to argue against the naysayers. Critical debate notwithstanding, I propose the following conditions as the main elements for a working definition of YAL. Young Adult literature:

1. Has plots focused on a conflict appropriate for the age-group (11-18)
2. Employs protagonists between the ages of 11-18
3. Uses protagonists who are on a quest or journey
4. Follows a protagonist who experiences a loss/gain
5. Has a story that expresses or displays an overall acceptance and respect for the audience (young people)
6. May tell the story by a young narrator or an adult using reflection or memory
7. Has a more complex plot (social issues, sexuality, political issues) that is not common in children's literature
8. Employs plots and devices that yield or enable insights to help cope with real life situations
9. Deploys plots appropriate for the developmental (emotional, spiritual, physical, educational, intellectual, etc.) stages of the audience
10. Contains elements of writerly craftsmanship
11. Exhibits a more elevated style, sentence structure, syntax, vocabulary, diction than children's literature

As a side note, not all of these conditions are necessarily present in all young adult literature. The 11

characteristics listed above identify some of the typical or general characteristics that one may find in young adult literature. For more on this, see my wiki page, [YAL Plus Theory](#), with ideas posted there culled from a professional development course I offered through the [Woodrow Wilson Teachers as Scholars](#) program hosted by [Montclair State University](#) in New Jersey.

Generally (but not universally), today's youths are wired and comfortable with technology. While issues of access and the broadening technology gap persist, today's youths have always known a world with email, IMing, SMS/text-messaging and the internet. What is no great surprise is that their reading materials of choice tend to be multimodal and multi-genre and are not likely to be the canonical texts we teach in our yearly curriculum.

Young readers today are desirous of highly graphic, anime-inspired texts with sound and action—not the kind of action found in an adventure story, but the kind found on the [Wii](#) or [World of Warcraft](#). We know that today's students are most deeply engaged when their senses are stimulated visually and physically (see James Paul Gee's [What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy](#) for information about the pedagogical validity of using video and computer games as instructional tools).

Just as we are reinventing ourselves as educators, these digital technologies are also reinventing young adult literature and our content areas. Educators should keep an open mind and embrace the evolving features of young adult literature as a genre to follow wherever it is going. It is time to step bravely into the metaverse — to go where several adventurous districts have gone before — and into Second Life.

What Is Second Life and Why Should I Have One?

Second Life (SL) is a 3-dimensional, massively multi-user virtual reality environment (MMUVE) developed by [Linden Lab](#) and comprises user-generated content which is user-owned and developed by its residents. This means that what a user (known on-screen as an "[avatar](#)") creates, purchases, builds or organizes, remains the property of that user. This is especially important when considering educational and legal issues regarding intellectual property rights and ownership.

Avatars are the graphical representations of the human beings who are sitting at computers and participating in a virtual space or world. These representations (whether graphic in the case of Second Life, or textual in the case of chat rooms or text messages) are manipulated by the keystrokes and mouse movements of a real person sitting at a real computer somewhere in the world.

Avatars within Second Life are initially given a default shape (chosen by the account holder) and can be altered or modified into a practically infinite number of shapes, sizes and colors. Avatars may be humanoid, cyborg, furry, vampire, dinosaur and so on. An avatar may even be an object or mass culture icon such as the Kool-Aid Man or Mario from the Nintendo games. Additionally, within Second Life, avatars can walk, run, jump, fly and teleport “virtually” anywhere in Second Life.

In order to understand how Second Life works, think about it as a tremendously large series of linked network servers with avatars borrowing spaces within those server systems. It is not necessary to pay for

opening a Second Life account, selecting and modifying an avatar, or navigating through the virtual universe — which can also be called a "[metaverse](#)" (coined in the novel [Snow Crash](#) by Neal Stephenson). Basic user accounts in Second Life are free. There are, however, paid accounts available for those avatars who wish to own virtual property or to build virtual sites such as businesses and schools.

While the initial concept of owning virtual property seems absurd to the uninitiated, when one considers renting space online or maintaining a web presence for one's website, the idea of owning a beachfront home on a virtual island (called a "[sim](#)", which is short for "simulator") may hold certain appeal for many of us. Once an avatar pays for a premium account (\$72 US per year in mid-2008), he or she is entitled to own virtual property, run a virtual business or to rent a place to "live." An avatar does not have to own or rent anything to activate a Second Life account, however. Indeed, many people choose to maintain the basic account and "live" unencumbered by virtual possessions.

The Second Life metaverse is huge and contains thousands of sites worth visiting. You must have an avatar in Second Life in order to visit any sites. You can, however, read about some of these sites that have been published in mainstream venues by following the links below:

The Islands of Jokaydia

<http://jokaydia.com>

<http://jokay.com.au>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

<http://tinyurl.com/hgf3w>

The Virtual Sistine Chapel on Vassar College

<http://www.vassar.edu/headlines/2007/sistine-chapel.html>

Democracy Island

<http://nyls.blogs.com/demoisland/>

NASA

<http://tinyurl.com/2v92zl>

Virtual Harlem: A 3-D Homage to the Harlem Renaissance

<http://www.rikomatic.com/blog/2007/12/virtual-harlem.html>

As of mid-2008, there are over 300 educational institutions (from middle schools through to graduate schools) actively represented in Second Life and which have an educational presence inworld. Classes are held here. Instruction is delivered and experienced in this realm. Training and professional development take place in this graphically represented virtual reality environment (VRE). Second Life presents opportunities for experiential learning and constructivist pedagogies that are limited only by one's imagination and the amount of time one can devote to developing sites (called "builds" in Second Life terms). Costs are nominal (the mid-2008 exchange rate for the purchase of Second Life monies, called "Linden dollars" was \$1 US = \$184 Linden). While fees may be incurred for the purchase of some virtual objects or the hiring of reputable educational builders and scripters, many images, textures and virtual objects may be obtained for free or donated from the numerous organizations devoted to open source

education. Several of these will be discussed in the sections below that discuss how literature is taught and experienced in Second Life.

YAL and Second Life: Perfect Together

While the sciences have, perhaps, a more palpable presence in Second Life, the humanities are experiencing a growing presence inworld, too. There are several organizations devoted to the development of pedagogically valid applications for teaching literature and composition in Second Life. One of those organizations is [Literature Alive!™](#) founded by <http://collegeenglish.wikispaces.com/> Beth Ritter-Guth] (a.k.a. Desideria Stockton in SL) in December 2006 as a voluntary effort along with Chief Educational Designer, [Eloise Pasteur](#) (a.k.a. Eloise Pasteur in SL) and Daliah Carter (a.k.a. Daliah Carter in SL) who serves as Office Manager. Later, I (<http://virtualnaylorproject.wikispaces.com/> Laura Nicosia], a.k.a. LauraMaria Onomatopoeia in SL), too, joined the organization as a content contributor. One of the basic tenets of [Literature Alive!](#) is its strong adherence to the principle of immersive learning experiences, collaborative knowledge building and constructivist pedagogies. This section discusses several aspects of the work that [Literature Alive!](#) engages in and how it approaches teaching literary texts inworld.

By mid-2008, [Literature Alive!](#) has produced over 27 literary projects and learning environments within Second Life. These builds are virtual reality sites that are designed, constructed and maintained through the auspices of Literature Alive! and are funded by the generous donation of numerous sponsors and philanthropic organizations, such as - but not limited to - the [New Media Consortium](#) (NMC), [Eloise Pasteur Educational Designs](#), EduIsland II, and numerous colleges and schools around the globe. These sites are intended to “create ethical and immersive learning environments that provide ‘added value’ to students” (Literature Alive! <http://tinyurl.com/69o2qv>).

Some of these builds in SL include:

- *Camelot*
- *The Canterbury Tales Virtual Pilgrimage*
- Heorot and Grendel's lair
- Tennyson's "Lady of Shallot"
- The Hall of British Romantics (Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy and Mary Shelly)
- "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
- The Kate Chopin and Regional Writers Classroom
- The Feral Cat Project (funded, in part, by a grant from the National Science Foundation)
- The Edgar Allan Poe *House of Usher' Project*
- The Harry Potter Castle
- The Choose Your Own Adventure Interactive Maze
- The American Project and Primary Documents Resource Library @ Lehigh Carbon Island
- The Mayflower Classroom
- *The Blithedale Romance* and American Romantics Project Classroom (Cullen Bryant, Thoreau, Emerson, Fuller, B and LM Alcott, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Poe)

- Brook Farm/Fruitlands Complex (B and LM Alcott, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Fuller)
- *Bailey's Cafe* (Gloria Naylor)
- The Spoon River Anthology Project @ Finger Lakes Community College
- The Maya Angelou virtual poetry project
- The Willow Springs/*Mama Day* Classroom @ Montclair University
- *The Women and Men of Brewster Place* (Gloria Naylor) Virtual Housing Tenement
- The Archetypal Cavern and Literary Theory Cave
- The Gothic British Literature Classroom (Wollstonecraft, M. Shelly, Lewis, Walpole)
- The Progressive Era Literature/Stephen Crane Classroom
- The Women and War Classroom @ Drexel University
- The Collaboration Station
- Dante's *Inferno* and *Linden Hills* Project

Several projects are in planning stages. Two of these include:

- The Literature Web-Tree of Knowledge Project
- The Huck Finn Project

How is Literature Taught in Second Life?

In virtual worlds such as SL, avatars may teleport to any location that's "open" to them (some groups chose to "lock" their sites and issue invitations to people to enter their island). Avatars may run, fly, hover or simply walk into an educational space. When the instructor has selected or built a particular space designed for student learning, the students sign into their Second Life accounts and await notification from the instructor identifying where they are to meet. This is done in any number of ways, including the delivery of Landmarks via note cards (email-like deliveries that are very straightforward to compose and deliver). (For information about how to establish a Second Life account and download the client software needed for accessing this virtual world, go [here](#).)

Once the avatars arrive at the site, they may stand or sit using a simple mouse command (i.e., right-click, choose: "Sit here"). As in "real life", classes are easier to initiate when the avatars are localized in one geographic region, such as a classroom or lecture hall. In some of these educational builds, students engage in large and small group discussions depending upon the teacher's lesson for the day ... just as they would in a traditional face-to-face classroom, more or less. There are times, of course, in which materials are best delivered or shared when students are looking at each other and are focused on the task or materials at hand. [See Image 1]



IMAGE 1 Ritter-Guth's meets her class in Finger Lakes for a large group discussion
Notice in Image 1 above that student avatars sit in floating chairs in stadium or auditorium type seating. Students use text-based chat to conduct their discussions, which are then easily saved for documentation and assessment purposes. In some cases and in some locations, avatars use voice to share their thoughts. In its earliest stages, communication in SL was entirely text-chat based. Now, voice chat has been fully enabled. This adds yet another dimension of immersion to holding classes inworld.

Whether an instructor decides to use text chat or voice chat, one of the most distinguishing features of holding group discussions in Second Life is that, unlike in real life (RL), whenever a new avatar enters the area, a chair may be provided at the click of a mouse. The seating is easily, and sometimes automatically, reconfigured to accommodate any number of participants. In RL, classroom teachers have to request a new desk or borrow one from a neighboring room. In SL, new equipment, furniture, and materials are a mere mouse-click away — and they are free! Even more so, in RL if a teacher wishes to reconfigure his or her classroom — say, remove or add walls, flood the room with more light, darken the room, change the color of the walls, and so on — work orders must be filed, costs weighed and budgets consulted. In SL, such matters are little more than a click, drag or delivery away.

Discussions in this environment are metacognitively and metareflectively potent since students have the opportunity to observe themselves and to see how they interact with their classmates. They become participant-observers and see themselves in their avatars as they are engaged in conversation.

Students also become immersed in the classroom activities and find that they are empowered by the manipulation of their avatars. Several learning theorists discuss how agency is nurtured via the use of an avatar (see, for example, Thomas, Turkle and Yee). These theorists have investigated how students become engaged and attached to their own learning through the embodiment and immersion they experience in the virtual *milieu* (such as Second Life). Consequently, students develop a growing sense of agency as they navigate through Second Life using their avatars.

Such agency begins at the very onset — as early as when students create their avatars. Through the process of selecting their avatars, students experience a willing suspension of disbelief and immerse themselves into their graphic representation of themselves. They engage with other avatars and begin the process of performing and proffering a self to this new social environment. When doing so, the human behind the keyboard may choose to project an aspect of his or her personality that he or she wishes to develop, or to suppress. The level of anonymity provided by inhabiting an avatar may facilitate the progress of social skills that might otherwise be hampered by face-to-face experiences. Shyness and social anxiety may be somewhat alleviated by the use of an avatar.

Inhabiting an avatar may be an invitation to role-play or to take on a new personality. [Angela Thomas'](#) (2007) research has identified how in the cyber world there “are multiple layers through which we mediate the self and [those] include the words we speak, the graphical images we adopt as avatars to represent us, and the codes and other linguistic variations on language we use to create a full digital presence” (p. 5). When students enter Second Life, they manipulate and embody an avatar, explore new environs, make new acquaintances, learn new content, acquire new skills, share their knowledge, gain agency and do so while having fun. Who wouldn't want this for our students?

Frankly, students typically enjoy learning in Second Life and seem to attend classes more frequently when

using this technology. Regardless of weather conditions, commuting problems, health issues, avatars can sign in to Second Life from their home computers or from a computer lab and attend class. Such a technology is a boon to attendance and ideal for distance learning. The effects of inworld immersion and student buy-in are more profoundly felt in Second Life than in chat rooms, threaded discussions in course management software like [Blackboard](#) or via sites such as [<http://www.illuminate.com/eLuminate>]. Students see each other, move through spaces with each other and manipulate objects (albeit virtual ones). The cognitive impacts of such experiential learning are deep and profound.

Besides the more traditional whole class or large group discussions, some sessions are held within actual settings from the particular texts being studied (e.g., the castle from Poe's *House of Usher*). *These classes are not merely Socratic discussions, Think/Pair/Share clusters or Jigsaw groupings. These are unique experiential field trips where students' avatars enter a selected scene from a text and gain both empathetic and sympathetic knowledge of the setting and the content. [See Image 2.]*



IMAGE 2 Ritter-Guth and Nicosia holding class at the diner from Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*
In Image 2, students and visitors listen to Ritter-Guth (as Desideria Stockton) give them directions about their tasks while visiting the diner from the book, [Bailey's Café](#) (1993). After the anticipatory set, avatars entered and moved through the diner and performed certain tasks. These tasks were designed by Ritter-Guth to deepen their content knowledge about the novel and to challenge the avatars to apply their learning in a collaborative and social environment.

While field trips to diners and cafés are possible in RL, visiting a replica of the specific café as Naylor describes is unlikely-to-impossible. In SL, however, a talented builder/scriptor can create a site based upon the descriptions the author provides. The more descriptive the text, the more accurate and detailed a build can become. Consequently, when selecting texts to represent and replicate in Second Life, educators may wish to choose stories, novels and poems with uniquely limned or described settings that are important or desirable for student learning.

Trips to some sites in RL are simply impossible or too expensive to pursue considering today's limited travel funds, strict bus schedules and liabilities. Imagine flying your class to an island community inhabited by the progeny of ex-slaves off the coast of the United States? Consider holding class in the graveyard in Willow Springs from Gloria Naylor's [Mama Day](#) [*See image 3*]? *Class trips to such a graveyard on such an island — especially considering its specific inhabitants and mystical qualities — are simply not possible in RL. In SL though, these trips are fairly easy to undertake.*



IMAGE 3 Nicosia meeting class in the graveyard from Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

By exploiting these qualities inherent within the Second Life platform, these mediated, distributed learning scenarios challenge and enable avatars to actively participate in their own learning and to construct new knowledge. Avatars become immersed in the text — they move through the scenes, manipulate digital artifacts and engage in deep textual comprehension. This is what Sosnoski and Portlock refer to as “narrative architecture” (2006, p. 67) and it is the basis for most of Literature Alive!'s educational builds.

For the Willow Springs graveyard task, for example, student avatars had just finished RL class discussions of the novel. They entered Second Life and teleported to Willow Springs Island, where they went on a scavenger hunt to find a “hidden” grave. Once they found the grave, they used their mouse to click on the headstone and received a note card identifying their next challenge. They were to go to the old well (a very important element in the novel) and to retrieve the name of a character from the Day Family Tree paratextual document. Once they received their respective assigned character, they were to write an obituary for that character by culling data from the novel, researching the life and times of residents on similar islands shaped by Gullah culture and by talking with their classmates. This is a high-level thinking activity that requires students (as avatars) to synthesize information, to build upon existing knowledge bases, and to create new knowledge. In addition, students were given a model obituary to help them frame their writing.

Once their obituaries were written, the avatars were to select a gravesite in the Day family graveyard, erect a tombstone (with the appropriate textures and height as specified in the novel) and click-and-drag their writing to the grave stone. This also automatically delivered their texts to the instructor (Nicosia or Ritter-Guth). Their writing was assessed as any composition would be assessed — using appropriate rubrics and standards for their particular grade/age/level.

Students enjoyed this exercise. It allowed them to laugh, move, explore, research and surf the internet, to explore beyond the four walls of a traditional classroom and to be creative. SL class sessions are rarely boring or “quiet.” There is a lot of laughing out loud (i.e. “LOL” in text-chats). Since when did learning have to preclude fun? D. Oblinger writes, “Digital games have the potential to bring play back to the learning experience” (Educause Quarterly <http://tinyurl.com/6hcdd7>). Second Life helps to make learning — deep learning — fun and effective. Imagine having students excited about coming to class so they can explore a new environment while learning more about the curriculum?

Moreover, can you envision telling your students (or your supervisor or principal, for that matter) that you intend to take your class on a field trip to visit the various levels of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* [see Image 4]? In real life, such trips would be imprudent — if even possible! Within Second Life, however, such experiences are the norm (if anything, within Second Life, can be considered thoroughly normal). Settings

and builds like Dante's *Inferno* and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* are especially effective; they appeal to numerous senses, very much like [synesthesia](#). Frankly, the most intense and effective builds use a wide variety of deep colors and rich textures. Some even use sounds, music and streaming video to add to the sense of immersion and sensory stimulation. These sites are not flat pictures or two-dimensional fronts (as in a Hollywood set). These builds can be traversed (around, through, under and over); they occupy space and lend a sense of embodiment and immersion to the palpable and familiar sense of "being lost in a good book."



IMAGE 4 Ritter-Guth, Pasteur and Nicosia meeting class in Hell for a lesson on Dante's *Inferno*

Shakespeare, Anyone?

Aficionados and students of [The Bard](#) will find a host of sites and immersive experiences in SL devoted to both Shakespeare in particular, and [The Renaissance](#), in general. Besides Literature Alive! sites, one may choose to visit [Renaissance Island](#). This island is devoted to historically accurate replicas from the Renaissance (shops and buildings are constructed to be appropriate to the times) avatars are dressed in period costume and speak in Renaissance English.

Additionally, avatars may visit a working replica of [The Globe Theater](#) and watch Shakespearean productions of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and other plays (tragedy and comedy) written by The Bard himself and performed by the [SL Shakespeare Company](#). The SL Shakespeare Company relives the spirit of Shakespearean thespians, but does so in the SL metaverse. Students can watch RL Shakespearean actors perform The Bard's plays in The Globe Theater, and interact (at appropriate times). [Here's a YouTube clip](#) of the SL Shakespeare Company performing ""*Hamlet*" act III, scene ii: The Mouse Trap. Such resources are a boon to the English and Language Arts teacher and to his or her students who learn best using visual or auditory materials.

One may ask, "Is teaching literature in Second Life effective and beneficial for my younger students — the middle and high school students who are still honing their learning styles?" The next section of this essay addresses this very question.

SL for Middle School?

One of the mantras for Second Life residents and tourists is: “Why not?” So, then, why shouldn’t middle and high school educators explore Second Life as a viable, authentic teaching environment and tool? Why should colleges experience all the benefits? Don’t we want middle school and high school students to experience communities of practice, to foster democratic collaboration, and to participate in a learning community? Shouldn’t younger students acquire skills such as the ability to: solve problems, scaffold prior knowledge, make wise life choices, establish both individual and group goals, and socialize with peers in a local, regional and global environment? Of course we do! And, Second Life offers such mediated learning environments for young and mature learners.

There are numerous individuals and an ever-growing number of educational districts that teach literature — and all disciplines — to high school and middle school students on what is called the [Teen Grid](#) (see [Ramapo Islands](#) and [Global Kids](#)). In order to keep under-age students from mingling with adults and perhaps venturing into areas of Second Life that are not child-friendly, Linden Lab created a separate “grid” or Second Life network for minors. Faculty and students must be screened before they are given a teen grid avatar and before they may open accounts on the teen grid.

Such accounts are restricted to their “home bases.” Main grid avatars may not simply teleport into the teen grid. There is a whole process to undertake before such a journey is initiated — and a new avatar must be created (with all that entails insofar as selecting a name, personalizing one’s look and filling one’s inventory). Needless to say, this is not a process that is taken lightly. Additionally, one must be sponsored by an accredited and verifiable school district in order to pass the screening process. Such steps are tedious, but in light of today’s more seedy and unfortunate events concerning children on the internet, this process is meant to protect children and youths.

One of the most prolific and visible educational presences in the teen grid is the island sponsored by Suffern Middle School in Suffern, New York, and developed and maintained by [Peggy Sheehy](#). The district established this virtual learning environment in August, 2006, and has brought over 1000 students (with their teachers) inworld for learning and training.

Sheehy explains that in their first year, eighth-grade English teacher, Ms. Kristi, was teaching John Steinbeck's [Of Mice and Men](#) — a staple in the English curriculum — and Sheehy helped the faculty member design and implement two inworld mock trials. One trial was held to charge George with Lenny’s murder. The other trial was to have students posit a new ending for the novel — one where Lenny lives and is brought to justice for the murder of Curly’s wife. Students become so invested in the task and so immersed in the storyline that Sheehy recalls one pupil saying, “Now we really have to read the book closely!”

Each student assumes a role in the scenario (e.g., course reporter, defense lawyer, prosecuting attorney, jury member, news reporter, etc.). Such responsibilities deepen the students’ sense of immersive commitment and “level the playing field where every student is engaged and active,” explains Sheehy. Click [here](#) to see a YouTube video of Sheehy and her students from Ramapo, and [here](#) for a PowerPoint presentation by one of Sheehy’s collaborators, Kevin Jarrett, a K-4 Technology Facilitator at Northfield Community School in Northfield, New Jersey.

Besides Steinbeck’s text, Ramapo students held inworld book talks for their Science Fiction unit and delved into deep, philosophical discourse regarding a favorite cyberpunk novel, [Snow Crash](#) by Neal

Stephenson (Click [here](#) to read a transcript of the group's discussion). Students also engaged in an interdisciplinary unit on the American Revolution, attended Socratic method discussions and explored a Philosopher's Chair event.

Literary studies in the TG are catching on and the excitement is palpable. You can read about Sheehy's work and contact her through her website, <http://www.metaversedltd.com>.

Author Chats Inworld

Poetry and book readings are popular pastimes in Second Life on both the main grid and the teen grid. Canonical texts, marginalized voices and pop cultures mingle together in the virtual environment — giving voice to previously unheard or suppressed writers, revivifying and restoring forgotten authors and revitalizing genres that print publishers do not deem sufficiently profitable. The cost to run readings and stage re-enactments is minimal, and the return on investment is mighty.

In the northern summer of 2008, the <http://www.plcmc.org/> Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County] offered an inworld series of author chats on the library's Second Life island, [Eye4You Alliance](#). The three events, called the "Summer Author Chats," offered authors and teens the opportunity to interact online on the teen grid in a safe and creative environment.

Kelly Czarnecki, Technology Education Librarian at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County explains that, "Having authors interact with teens in the medium of a virtual world is not only a great way to bring stories to life, but connects youth with authors in ways they might not have the opportunity to otherwise."

"This series merges the traditional 'Author in the Library' summer reading event with the exciting technology of Second Life," says Lisa Perez, the Area Library Coordinator of Chicago Public Schools Department of Libraries. "We're bringing authors to where the teens are, and enabling them to interact and learn from each other."

Teens assisted in planning these events, participated in an avatar design contest, created web-based support materials, and advertised these programs to the Second Life teen community. Writing, role-playing, and anime/manga groups are just some of the teen-driven, literary-related groups within Teen Second Life.

The three participating authors, Meg Cabot (link to come), [Jack Gantos](#), and [Jacqueline Woodson](#), have received dozens of awards and distinctions, but had never participated in a Second Life program before. This was their first Second Life endeavor, and from all accounts, was a major success.

Rhetoric and Composition

[Sarah Robbins](#) (a.k.a. Intellagirl Tully in SL) was one of the first academics in Second Life to establish presence for English as a discipline. She initially taught several classes of Composition and Rhetoric

inworld, and has since then co-authored the popular [Second Life for Dummies](#) with Mark Bell (a.k.a. *Typewriter Tackleberry in SL*). Robbins set the benchmark for teaching immersively and was the first to understand how to use SL in ways other than for merely recreating RL. Robbins has several presentations available for reference on [Slideshare](#), and manages the [Second Life Education blog](#).

Concluding Thoughts

As with teaching and learning in face-to-face classes, teaching literature in Second Life requires appropriate assessments (i.e., formative, summative, and experiential) and clear learning objectives. The use of any cutting-edge technology (virtual reality environments such as Second Life are but one example of what's available) must be pedagogically valid and must adhere to set professional standards.

Consequently, as educators, we must ask ourselves the following as we build immersive, constructive learning:

- What will and can we do to foster intellectual, social and personal achievement for our students?
- How do we and our students best understand the nature and progress of their learning?

In other words, we know that experiential, immersive learning occurs in Second Life. The overriding question, then, is how do we assess our students' learning inworld? Are these assessment methods necessarily different in some way from those we perform in real life? And, if so, how do we address these differences? At present, our answers to these questions have been clear: our students must display mastery of both the skills and content of our discipline. English and Language Arts are both a skills and a content area and, while immersion and agency flourish in Second Life, we must work to maintain pedagogical validity as we appropriate these amazing tools and technological toys.

Teaching literature in Second Life is alive, vibrant and valid. It appeals to our students' learning styles and encourages educators to remain life-long learners. Digital games and environments are pervasive and ubiquitous parts of our culture; consequently, we educators should adopt and adapt these technologies to our own purposes. That is, to the education of our children and to the ideals of life-long professional development.

Works Cited

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Additional Resource Links

- <http://collegeenglish.wikispaces.com/LiteratureAlive>
- <http://collegeenglish.wikispaces.com/handout>
- <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists>
- [Second Life Book Events/The Bookstacks](#)
- “101 Uses for Second Life in the College Classroom”. Available from: <http://trumpy.cs.elon.edu/metaverse/gst364Win2005/handout.html>