

Students Try A Virtual World

Teachers turn cyber worlds into lessons

BY JAN WILSON

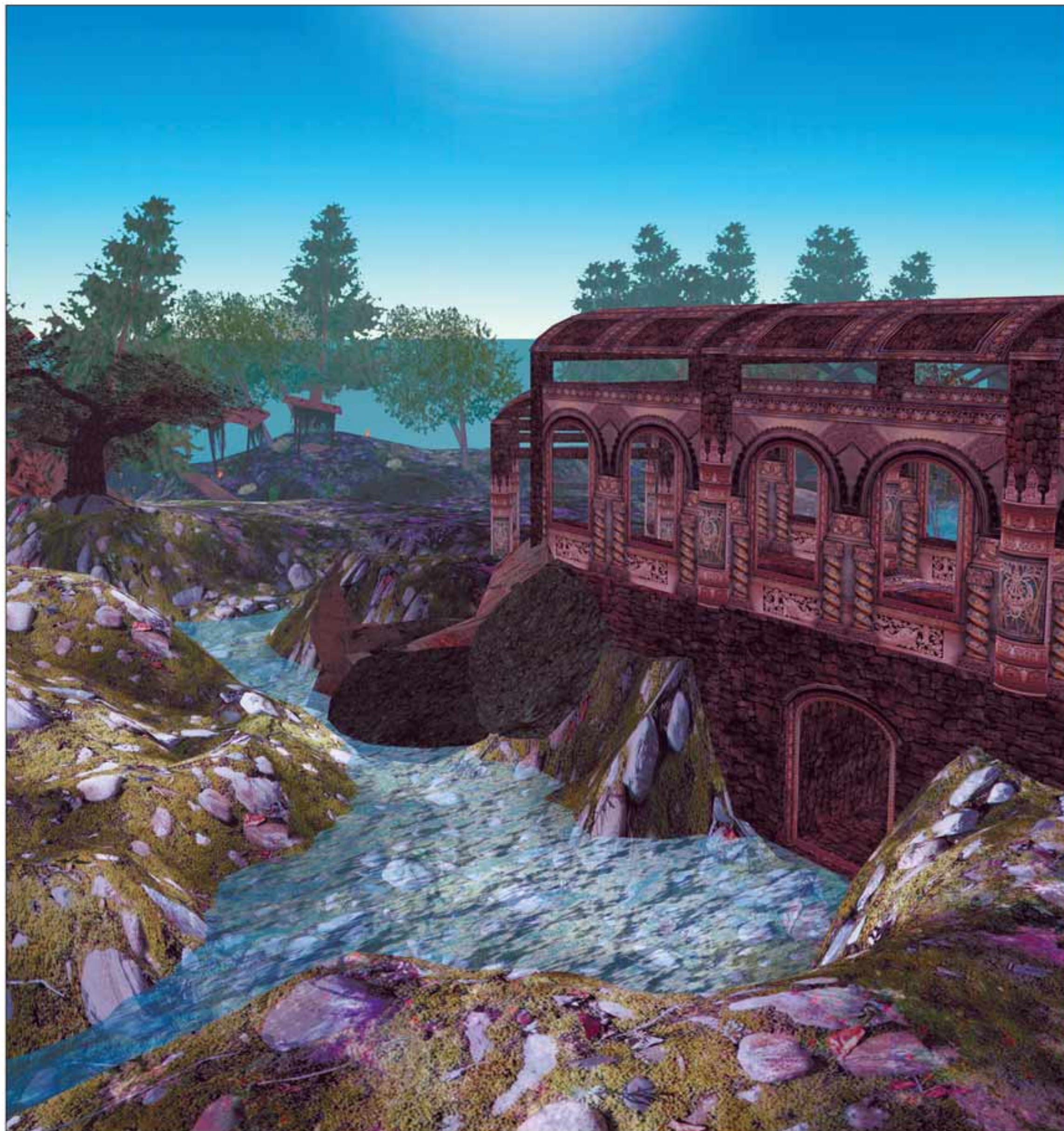
When you think about all of the things that your teen has to do in the real world, you can probably hardly imagine what they find so compelling about the virtual worlds available to them on the Internet and through video games. Educators have long known how entertaining these activities are and have tried to harness their power to educate our kids in schools. Some believe that they have found the answer in Second Life, a virtual community where kids can practically apply what they learn everyday.

Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely created by its residents in 2003. Since its inception, it has grown explosively, and today is inhabited by millions of residents from around the globe. In 2005, Linden Lab, creators of Second Life, started Teen Second Life, a version of the world specifically for teenagers, which limits access to 13-17 year olds and educators. Teens in Second Life create an "avatar" to move around (even fly), engage in commerce, participate in entertaining activities, and, important to educators, attend classes and workshops and create things that model skills taught in math and science, such as buildings and experiments.

"What the teachers have reported to me consistently is that much deeper discussions happen across the board in Second Life and the participation is enormously raised," says Peggy Sheehy, an instructional technologist at Suffern Middle School in Suffern, N.Y., which has 400 students on Teen Second Life. "Children who wouldn't normally participate in a real life situation are very invested in the character they have created and are sometimes more comfortable when they are typing than when they are speaking."

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Second Life, a virtual world where real-life lessons can be applied.

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The digital divide

The attraction of Second Life may be difficult for parents to understand, although Sheehy notes that there weren't many questions, and no objections from families, when Suffern Middle School became the first school in the nation to move into this virtual reality.

"The administration asked all the

right questions to make sure this was academically sound and guaranteed students' privacy," she says. "Others on the Teen Second Life can't see us or can't communicate with us." She hopes that as more schools follow Suffern's lead in this world, her students may be allowed to interact with them.

Global Kids, Inc. a New York City-based organization that uses digital

media to promote global awareness and teen involvement in civic activities, was the first organization to create a dedicated space for developing educational programming in Teen Second Life.

"Once we went into Teen Second Life, we found things we didn't find anywhere else," says Barry Joseph, Director of the Global Kids' Online Leadership Program. "In Teen Sec-

ond Life you have a spatial relationship with others around you and it feels like you are with people. We could do the same workshops for kids virtually that we were doing in reality.

"We could do these workshops in ways that we never thought were possible. In Teen Second Life you don't have to just imagine you are in a factory – you are in a factory. And teens are building the factory," he says. "A lot of our top-down approach for spreading information was met equally with ideas from the bottom up. The space is about putting young people in charge and giving them tools. What we are able to do as educators in that space is to tap into nascent leadership skills."

Marianne Malmstrom, a middle school technology teacher at the Elisabeth Morrow School in Englewood, who is just starting to explore Teen Second Life as part of her own professional development, says Teen Second Life is valuable in helping to alter teen social networks. "The kids who are comfortable with the technology might not be coolest kids in the grade, but they have the leverage in this environment," she says. Adds Sheehy: "The kids say that in Second Life there are no cliques – no one knows who is wearing Hollister clothes and who rides the shorter bus to school."

Creating curriculum

Suffern Middle School uses Teen Second Life for math, science, health, language arts and other subjects. "We look at anything that would be enhanced by bringing it into the virtual world," Sheehy says. Students have an account they can use to log in at home for social networking and collaborating on projects. Teachers can also use it to have team meetings. "It's a classroom that you can access from anywhere," she says.

Teens working with Global Kids have developed CONSENT! which addresses the history of medical experimentation on African-American prisoners. In its High School for Global Citizenry, Global Kids uses Teen Second Life to offer a freshman-level science class. The organization



also runs an internship program to interest teens in the virtual world in global and social issues, and collaborates on a program with Youth Venture to support 40 groups of teens developing social enterprises within the Teen Second Life community.

Joseph says, "It's a toolkit for teachers to use. A year ago there were five or six islands owned by educators in the space. Now there are probably 3,000 each owned by different educators. We are about to launch our ninth island and we started with only one."

Malmstrom, whose school is just beginning to look at the implication for this kind of technology in its own classrooms, notes that using real-life skills in the virtual world can strengthen those skills and make them more meaningful for teens. "We spend a lot of time teaching kids how to read but we live in a very visual world and they need to be able to understand visuals as well," she says. "They need to understand how to navigate through these worlds with some skills – the reality is, this is their world."

The educators agree that like most new technologies, Second Life will move quickly from being utilized in just a few schools to becoming "the next big thing." Noting Second Life's legitimacy in higher education, Sheehy believes that the technology's use will grow in secondary education as teachers realize how to tap into its power.

"All sorts of studies have been done that verify that our students' brains are wired differently because of the bombardment of digital media," she says. "Yet we are still lining them up in rows and teaching them to be prepared for life—unfortunately its life in 1950."

Adds Joseph, "When you are using Second Life you are going into the youth media space. It's our youth's playspace and is our workspace. We can't force ourselves into their world, or them into ours, we have to work together."

Jan Wilson of Hoboken is a writer, mother, and The Parent Paper's education columnist. You can contact Jan at parentpaper@northjersey.com.



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