Global Kids, Inc.'s
Best Practices in Using Virtual Worlds For Education

The first Best Practices document created by Global Kids, Inc. <olp.GlobalKids.org> was originally produced in the summer of 2006 after six months working in the teen grid of the virtual world of Second Life (TSL). It was created by Barry Joseph, Rafi Santo, Lori Feldman and Zach Nataf. It only addressed education for residents of Second Life, teens 13-17 years old who "hung-out" there. A year later, after eighteen months of work in Second Life, the original document was significantly revised and new material was added. The new material addressed lessons learned from our after school programs as well as various options for bringing content into a virtual world. This new document, replacing the old, was created by Barry Joseph with Rafi Santo and Tabitha Tsai in the summer of 2007. To learn more about the work that informs this report, please visit our blog at HolyMeatballs.org.

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Best practices for working in TSL

1. What happens in the teen grid stays in the teen grid.
Unless you document the program, no one outside the teen grid will ever know your program even existed. However, SL offers a myriad of methods for digital documentation. Capture chat logs. Blog. Take photos. Blog. Record video and audio. Blog. Leverage teens ability and interest to document and increase content, encourage processing, and promote youth voices. Support teen reporters with direct blog access under the supervision of an editor.

2. 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. A workshop in Second Life can start in the GK Clubhouse, move to the factory, shift to the cloud platform, transfer to the dance club, then conclude at the campfire. Each location can be associated with different types of activities, norms and behaviors. For example, everyone knows to start at the GK Clubhouse, expect interactive activities in the factory, have fun at the dance club and that processing and closure will occur around the campfire. There are different ways of acting expected in each setting; establishing the association between each modality and a specific location allows the location to be used as embodied shorthand to create the desired mode of interacting.

3. If you build it, they will come.
Knowing an audience is waiting can add motivation to the teens. Leverage the larger TSL community as an audience for whatever is developed by the teens. Create a game. Host a teach-in. Then let the teens recruit and publicize. The teens are already networked in the TSL social scene and know that their peers are always looking for something interesting to do.

4. Go beyond TSL.
Leverage existing Internet content and tools. Even if the facilitators are in a different room than the teen participants, they can still run the program as if they were in a computer lab. Create a web-based scavenger hunt, with teams organized through Skype. Direct the teens to relevant multimedia or a socially-conscious game. It will increase engagement and develop transferable skills.

5. Use real world content when addressing real world issues.
Discussing substantive issues in a place that feels surreal can make them feel distant. Use photos or a guest speaker, anything "from the other side," that feels real to give the issues weight.

6. Don't wait until someone has the floor to start typing.
Prevent the tempo-killing pauses when waiting for someone typing to finish their thought or those fast typists who always dominate a conversation. When possible, facilitators should prepare scripts for cutting and pasting into public chats, and participants should be encouraged to type up their comments while waiting their turn to speak.

7. Don't fear multiple communication channels.

Multiple channels can be used to add social nuance, organize various modes of communication in a more manageable form, and leverage teen abilities to multitask. The public chat can be utilized for group conversation at the same time as a private "group"-based IM chat. Use private IMs to communicate one-on-one with a participant, and visa-versa. Set up "friend"-based IM groups for small group project development. Utilize non-SL channels, such as AIM (individual or group), Skype (individual or group), or Nicecast (broadcast into TSL). Establish different types of content for different channels, e.g. discuss content in the group-based IM chat but raise procedural issues through individual IMs to a facilitator. Be a fast typist. Use Skype to create a back channel amongst facilitators or to bring voice to a real-world program or in-world event.

8. Carefully design and build the tools required.

Find existing facilitation tools and workshop items and then build whatever you can't find. The design embedded within technology shapes the ways we interact - design your desired means of interacting within your build. If a method can not be found for ordering contributions to a discussion, build one, and display each person's order. To explore issues of discrimination, create a version of musical chairs that reject people of a specific background. Embed workshop content within the items themselves to motivate learning through exploration and discovery. Create signup sheets in the form of a clickable document.

9. Ensure the program is designed for the recruited participants

Are the participants seasoned veterans or new to TSL? Are they in the same time zone or scattered throughout the world? Do they have the technology required for the planned activities? Do the teens, as a collective, contain all of the skills required by the curriculum and, if so, does the curriculum take into account methods for creating "cross-functional teams," in which individuals pool their strengths towards a common goal? Are the activities and facilitation tools designed to account for the diversity of participants' backgrounds, learning styles, and age/development?

Best practices for bringing a youth development model into TSL

1. Build, build, build!
Create as many opportunities as possible for teens to express themselves through building. SL is all about building so it is almost hard NOT to do this. Encourage them to build the facilities and material required for the program (the meeting rooms, the workshop materials, t-shirts for the program, etc.). Building items that they can use creates a sense of ownership, which increases retention. (Have a team hired to build the necessities, in case teens fall short of their commitments). Incorporate building into the activities themselves (e.g. build and act out a scene in a life-size diorama, create a billboard about injustice). Create weekly projects that culminate in some form of public build. Use the weekly projects to model movement towards a project culminating build. Use these builds as a way for the teens to centralize and demonstrate what they are learning. Don't just build from scratch – modify or "mod" existing content, both within Second Life or from the web (e.g. open-sourced images from Flickr or clothing designs).

2. Don't just build; design and manipulate avatars.
Create opportunities for identity play and self expression through avatar creation and manipulation. It can be used to generate empathy, by putting the teens in the shoes of another. It can be used for theatrical purposes, to enact a skit about an issue. It encourages creativity and creates great photo opportunities. Explore existing avatar choices to bring up issues of gender and racial representation; use non-human avatars to address issues of discrimination.

3. Think globally, act locally.
While the teens will be from all over, they experience TSL as their shared community. Turn educating and inspiring that larger community into a project goal. Making a difference will add motivation for participants. Strategizing approaches for effective education and advocacy will challenge the teens to think creatively and critically. It will appeal to their desire to have their voice heard and to make a difference. It will develop their leadership abilities. The final action(s) can leverage existing, online actions; why rebuild the wheel? Finally, it means the programmatic impact moves outside the scope of just the participants to a larger community.

4. Know when teens know best.
The teens will always know more in certain areas than any adult will about TSL and how the program can best be run. They can leave the private island and participate in the forums. They hold greater social capital and wider networks. They know expectations, observe norms, and hold extensive local knowledge within the teen grid. Keep a flexible mind when designing curriculum and be ready to take the lead from participants to change it. Hire a TSL native as an intern. Ask them what TSL resources exist that can be utilized, both on the mainland and in the forums. Build regular teen feedback into the program (before, during and after activities), use various channels to solicit that feedback, and reflect this feedback through visible changes in the program.

5. Employ effective, rigorous, targeted recruitment.
For our Camp GK 2006, we used a number of Internet and SL-based methods to ensure that the appropriate teens learned about our programs and apply. We used the response-o-matic Web site to create the online application. We required all teens to get a "notecard of recommendation," as short as a simple paragraph, from any Linden. We tracked each

applicant's SL skills to ensure they and the program were a good fit. Our teen intern created a billboard to advertise the program then used his extensive land ownership to locate the advertisement throughout the teen grid. We ran a recruitment pitch for the welcome screen that all residents saw when they first logged into TSL. Applicants were required to write two brief essays about a global issue of concern and a difference they have made in their community. Extensive contact information was required, for both participants and their parents, in order for us to stay connected outside Second Life. This process allowed us to reach the most appropriate teens for the program and allowed them to give us the information we needed to identify them as such.

6. Replace the dominant TSL culture with your own.
Just like the Web, TSL tends to be shaped by a libertarian, anarchic culture which cuts against the grain of Global Kids' organized, substantive, and deliberative activities. We challenged this larger culture by creating a highly competitive application process (to create a sense of exclusivity and set a counter-tone) and expecting the teens to commit for a reasonable amount of time (three hours a day, for 4 weeks) in order to earn an incentive ($100US). We held regularly planned meetings. We established clear guidelines, boundaries and expectations. The topic and tone was established through both program advertisements and the application material. This led to a very high retention rate (only one person dropped out of the program), a strong ability to stay on topic, and a complete absence of griefing (disruptive behavior).

7. Support emerging leadership
Create opportunities for leadership and support it. Empower teens to be group or land managers. Speak on in-world panels about their experiences. Meet regularly as a group to offer support and process their experiences. Facilitate workshops. Give tours. Run movie screenings. Take photos. Host parties. Report on blogs, Moderate events. Promote events. Create tools. Design spaces. Create contests. Make surveys. Create groups. Ask how you can support their leadership.

Best Practices In Using Second Life for Real World Education

1. Playground versus Workplace

To many, a classroom that felt like a playground would be viewed as a failure. In Second Life, however, especially in the teen grid, it is the norm. SL is already a game-like environment, where residents can not help but play with concepts of self representation, with alternative physics, and more. But the workplace of the educator, who may be on a schedule with serious content to address, need not be in conflict with the playspace of the learner, who wants to have fun and bring a creative dynamic to their interactions. Educational programs work best in Second Life that can strike a balance, live in the space where the line between the two is impossibly blurred, and roll with the unexpected consequences.

In one week in the Fall of 2006, Global Kids brought two sets of after school youth into Second Life, each for the first time. One was a group using Second Life to make serious games. They entered on a Monday. The second was a group using Second Life to make machinima. They entered on a Tuesday. That Tuesday evening, back at home, after dinner, one of us logged into Second Life to do some work. Standing there, waiting for the avatar to finish rezzing, were two students from one program and a third from another. The youth were from all over New York City, yet unlikely to ever meet in person. Yet there they were in Second Life, meeting one another, and now patiently waiting for the GK staff member to appear as well. Before long a dozen teens had logged in, not just from these two programs but from our summer camp as well. They all hung out and chatted. The campers offered to take the new residents on a tour of the grid while other youth from the two after school programs went to the closest sandbox to practice building together. Most students do not want to return to school after escaping for the day; these teens, however, could not wait to get back.

2. Performative

Every day, through a million different decisions, we construct how we want to appear to others, through the way we dress, walk, shape our bodies, and more. In Second Life, the performative aspect of these decisions becomes explicit, as the decisions are intentional and often extreme. The sense of safety through anonymity can encourage one to experiment in ways not possible offline. One can change his or her gender, race, and even their species. As James Paul Gee once said when visiting Global Kids Island, "For the first time in your life, you can choose when to use gender, ethnicity, or class as a strategy. You can use it with people when you want to or you can put it aside." The dynamic nature of our daily performance of "self" is also emphasized, as it is as easy in Second Life to change one's gender as it is to change one's pants. Educational programs can not only leverage the impermanence of identity within virtual worlds but help to make these issues explicit for learners or use these features to explore various real world issues like race or class.

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We eventually got used to the fact that our teen intern, Mercury Metropolitan, who presented as a black female, was actually a white male. When asked he had this to say about it: "At first it was really a personal experiment. I wanted to see what sort of reaction I received and if I was treated any differently. When I first started, I was a white male avatar, and found it difficult to fit into some already existing cliques. So, I wanted to try a different approach - creating a virtual identity that was different from my real identity, but remaining transparent about my real life identity if ever questions were brought up in conversation. Being honest about your real identity is important if you want to form 'real' friendships, ones that can even extend outside of the virtual world. I was actually treated even better than I was as a white male avatar. There were also a lot more clothing choices as a female. I've grown attached to this female avatar."

3. Collaboration and Cross-functional Teams

One of the strengths of a virtual world is the ability to collaborate. A sandbox is always a popular place in Second Life, where residents often hang out and simply play by building things together. A solitary educational task in Second Life can be turned from dull to exciting when done by a team. For example, to teach teens how to build basic objects and bring images into Second Life, we pair teams with words, such as "peace" or "justice," send them to the web to find images that depict either their presence or absence, then train them to create billboards in-world to show off their finds. Cross-functional teams, one form of collaboration encouraged by virtual worlds, was described by James Paul Gee as collaborations in which:

> …players form teams in which each player contributes a different set of skills. Each player must master a specialty… but the players must understand each other's specializations well enough to coordinate with one another. Thus, the knowledge needed to play the games is distributed among a set of real people and their smart tools, much as in a modern science lab or high-tech workplace.

When we make machinima in our after school program, everyone plays a different role. Some teens focus on the film making skills, such as directing, or acting, or filming. Other focus on the Second Life aspects, creating sets, or costumes, or avatars. No one teen can do it all, but together they have all the skills they need, and more, to pull it off.

4. Social Networking

Second Life is not only a graphically rich 3D building environment. It is also an emerging social network, similar to others like Facebook and MySpace, in which individuals connect with other individuals, forming networks of connections which interconnect with other networks of connections. There are many tools in Second Life for participating in the emerging social network: join or create a group, send an IM to a group to get help from those logged in, send and receive group notices, add people to your friends list and more. These tools can be used to publicize events, to locate advice or help, or, as Henry Jenkins details in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, educate teens about how to effectively use these networks:

> Learning in a networked society involves understanding how networks work and how to deploy them for one's own ends. It involves understanding the social and cultural contexts within which different information emerges, when to trust and when not to trust others, to filter and prioritize relevant data, and how to use networks to get one's own work out into the world and in front of a relevant and, with hope, appreciative public.

We always make sure our teens join relevant groups once they enter Second Life. Rather than answer their questions, such as "I need to film on a racetrack – where can I find one?" or "How can I make a car," we ask them to send a group IM. Someone is bound to be online who can help and they need to learn how to access and assess the resource within their social networks. This turns what may look like an isolated teen alone at a computer into one awash in rich and varied social connections.

5. Recognize and Support Skill Stratification

Learners will develop skills in different orders and at different rates. Some will be fascinated with their avatar, learning sophisticated ways to modify their shape or create clothing. Some will be drawn to build increasingly more sophisticated objects. Others will make friend after friend and learn how to manage the social network. Rather than be a liability, this can be a strength. Support the leadership skills of those early adapters who develop certain skills, encouraging them to help others and make that role visible.

In our after school machinima program, six sessions in Second Life had barely passed before one GK trainer overheard one GK youth leader tell another, when having difficulty in Second Life, to "Ask Joe." Not the GK trainer, an expert in Second Life, but Joe, a teenager, who had emerged as the first peer resource. For weeks after, rather than answer certain questions, the GK trainers would defer to Joe for an answer and, at times, ask him to first learn a skill and then teach the others. This initiated a year of the youth looking to one another for guidance as different teens specialized and excelled at different skills.

6. Teacher becomes Facilitator, Student becomes Peer Mentor

You do not need to know something in Second Life in order to teach it – you just need to know how to connect your students with people who do. As a social network, information and people are ever-present and fluid; educators who can navigate these networks and train their students to do the same need not rely on being the expert importing knowledge but become facilitators connecting students and information.

As teachers become facilitators, and teens specialize and their skills stratify, learners are able to teach one another, not necessarily in a formal manner but informally, when required. Rather than isolate learners from one another, or discourage side conversations, the interactions between students can be where some of the best learning takes place, for all involved.

During our after school gaming program, two GK Trainers worked with fifteen teens. Each teen picked one thing they wanted to learn. Not only would it have been impossible for the two trainers to simultaneous teach fifteen different Second Life skills, but most of the skills were beyond the modest abilities of these trainers: building a car, designing clothing, etc. But by the end of the day each teen said they learned the skill they wanted to know. How? After gathering a list of the desired skills, the GK trainers sent a group IM to the Global Kids' group with the list and a request for help. Within ten minutes all of the after school teens were paired with one or two teens in-world and were learning their desired skills. When an in-world helper was not up to speed, a new request was sent to the group and a new volunteer was recruited. This would have been a nightmare to coordinate in advance; it relied on the ability to reach out in the moment to those currently online, relying on the fact that help is usually available. So rather than teach the SL skills, the GK trainers set-up the relationships, wandered the room making sure the students were getting the support they required, and processed it together afterwards as a group.

7. Scale Projects to Fit Resources

Not all programs meet for the same period of time. Not all programs have teens with strong digital literacy skills, nor teens who can spend time in Second Life outside the program. As Second Life creates opportunities to literally build your dreams, it is easy to overreach. Just because it CAN be built in Second Life does not mean you and your program can be the ones to build it.
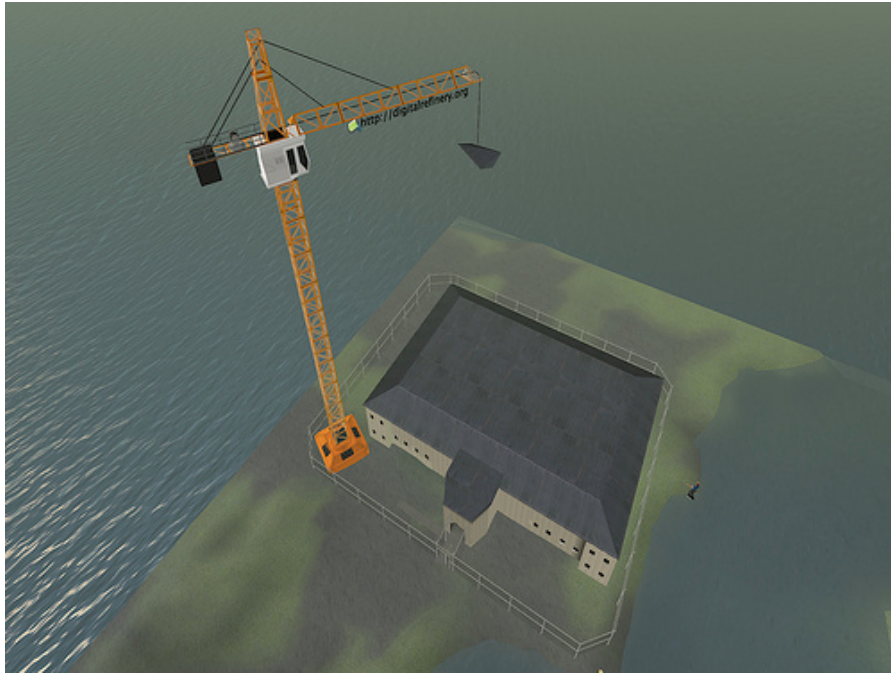
In our first year bringing our after school gaming program into Second Life, we made one project scaling mistake after another. First we presumed we could teach the participants sophisticated skills like coding, even though they only met with us once a week, on substandard computers, and had little access to Second Life outside our program. We then turned for help to an after school program we were teaching remotely in Washington, D.C., at a technology high school. The computers were excellent and the teens had strong digital literacy. However, they too had little access outside the program and, though meeting twice a week, the program ran half as long as it needed to be. Luckily, we found a third group of teens, self-organized in Second Life with endless time in-world and high-end SL skills, with which to collaborate and complete the project. Had we designed a more modest final project for our after school gaming program we would not have run over schedule nor been desperate to add one group of teen resources after another.

8. Situate Second Life within a Larger Internet Ecology

No virtual world is an island (even if you can rent one in Second Life). Leverage the greater Web 2.0 world – in which participants create and share content – to take full advantage of the ability to bring content in to, and take it out of, SL. The whole is great than its parts. This also allows the use of Second Life as a tool for producing youth media and distributing it to a broader audience.

In its first few weeks, over a thousand people on YouTube.com watched the machinima made in our after school program. Teen reporters write articles about our programs on our blog, HolyMeatballs.org, and post photos uploaded to our account on Flickr.com. They debate issues on public forums like MacArthur's Spotlight on Digital Media and Learning. They use images.google.com and Wikipedia.com to research photos and information for workshops. Second Life may play a central role in these programs, but incorporating these other tools enhances what a virtual world can offer.

9. Leverage In-world Resources

Don't rebuild the wheel. Leverage existing in-world resources, both people and tools, to strengthen your programs. Use the SL listservs to find people and tools that people recommend. Shop in Second Life and on the web-based stores to find the tools you need. Use your social networks to find the people who can help. And if you can not find the tool you need, build it yourself!

For displaying photos and text, we often use AngryBeth's whiteboard. It is a board that you can pre-load with images (composed of pictures or text) which can be clicked-through to display. When we needed to curate games made by teens on our new serious gaming island, we found a teen volunteer to manage the project. Volunteers are easy to come by in SL; there are always people looking for something to do, especially things that will make them feel like they are making a difference. The teen managing our island then co-taught two sessions of our after school gaming programs, using Skype and Second Life to give the teens in Brooklyn, New York a tour of game genres in TSL, all from the comfort of his British living room.

10. When Technology Fails, Know When To Move On

Technology has this funny thing about not working when you least expect it. Don't throw in the towel at first blush, but also know when to move on. Be flexible with the program and have a back-up handy just in case. When possible, test everything in advance. Is Second Life down? Is a new version required? Did that item that worked for adults also work with teens?

We were so excited to give the teens in our after school machinima program a sophisticated tool for filming. These virtual cameras allow the user to establish a path and then sit on a chair that will trace it as he or she films. However, no one had brought this camera over from the main grid to the teen grid before. Certain features only worked for adults, and not teens. As we had not tested it on teens in advance, we learned the hard way, wasting precious program time trying to figure out why it did not function properly. As we tried to debug it over the next few weeks, we continually entered the program convinced it would now work only to learn, to our disappointment, that something new was in the way. Resolving that the program was a bad place to debug the camera, we eventually decided to move on, perhaps a few sessions too late. (A few months later, after it was all fixed, we re-introduced it to the program to great success).

11. Time is Relative

The sense of time in a classroom is different within a place like SL. Things can both take longer yet feel shorter. The urgency to complete a task becomes secondary to the experience of the task itself. Give more time than you may imagine ever needing and be ready to rip student off the screen like flies on fly paper.

In our after school programs which do not use computers, we have three guidelines. One Mic *means one person speaks at a time.* Safe Space *means we do not have to agree with one another but can disagree respectfully. And* Participation *means to get involved. But as soon as we introduced computers into our programs we were forced to add a fourth guideline:* People Before Computers *(or PBC for short). PBC means that when it is time to focus one's attention away from the computer, people come first. A gentle reminder of PBC is usually needed when transitioning from Second Life back to the real world, both from the GK trainers and teens as well.*

12. Distance Learning Tool

Do not underestimate the distance learning potential of Second Life, especially when used in conjunction with voice and web-based tools. Your avatar projected on the screen, in a classroom or in a conference, can be more effective at times than projecting a live video feed. Rather than feeling insubstantial, it can offer a strong presence.
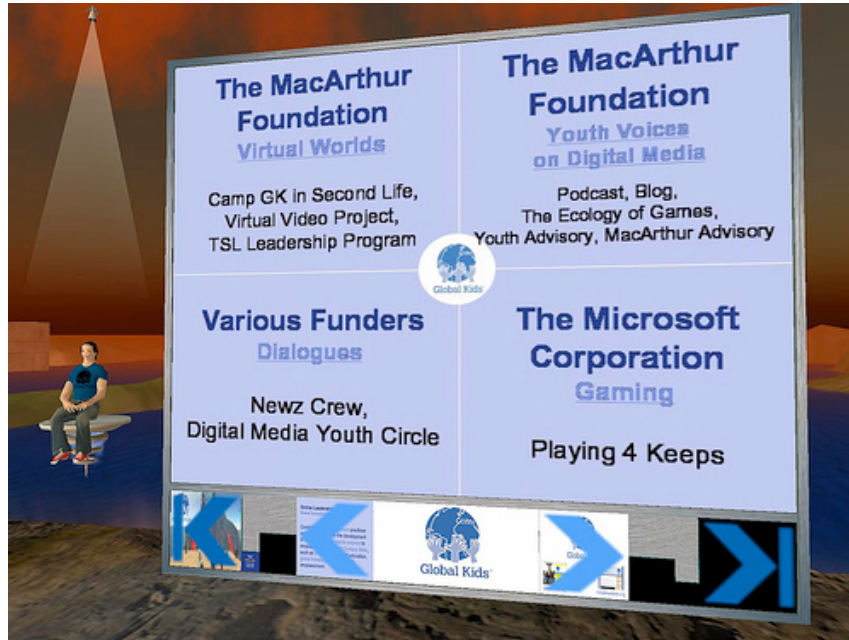
Global Kids used Second Life, Skype and the classroom management system, TakingITglobal's TIGed, to run an after school high school program in another state, training the teens to use Second Life. A similar program combined a conference call system to a speaker with Second Life to work with a group of teens to curate exhibits about the Holocaust in Second Life. We regularly run panels at conferences bringing teens from around the world to speak on a variety of topics, using Second Life and Skype. We have used it as well when we did not feel up to traveling; in fact, at the 2007 NTEN conference, the director of the OLP program received the highest audience ratings of almost 250 presenters, and he was never even there in person!

Best practices for bringing content into Second Life

The following are just a few of the many ways to bring content into Second Life, using examples from Global Kids programs, offered in the hopes of inspiring new ideas.

Interactive workshops
Based on bringing a youth development model into virtual worlds, Global Kids runs interactive, experiential workshops around global and social issues. Teens walk across floating platforms textured with maps of the continents to guess global income and population distribution. They compete inside a factory to attract the business of a global corporation. We pose extreme statements about all sorts of issues as they fly to platforms to literally take a stand for their positions: agree, disagree, or unsure.

Photo shows
To show the photos from our after school Xpressions program, we build flowerpots, one per student, with one flower for each photo. For the U.S. Holocaust Museum we hosted a virtual version of their building projecting photos from Darfur on its walls. To explore issues of peace and justice, the teens created billboards with photos found on the web.

Scavenger hunts
For the UNICEF A World Fit For Children Festival, teens had to look for hidden eggs but only received points when they correctly answered questions about global human rights. We used a similar process, with hidden recycling bins, to explore issues around global warming, and a more complex version with multicolored flowers that could only be picked after answering questions about the International Criminal Court.

Quizzes
Our first project in Second Life was an essay content whose application process was hidden within a volcano. A red amulet was required to enter the volcanic cave. The only way to get the amulet, however, was to sit on a "rock throne" and then answer questions posed by a giant globe that floated out of a lake.

Building contests
Oh, how we LOVE the building contests. For our visit from noted games and learning scholar, James Paul Gee, teens competed to build the best avatar for him to wear and comment upon. For the UNICEF A World Fit For Children's Festival, we introduced over 70 teens within 14 teams to this global agreement then challenged them to build a structure to teach teens about it. For our one year anniversary party, teens competed to build the best birthday cake.

Guest speakers
Noted M.I.T. scholar of popular culture, Henry Jenkins, spoke through a streamed conference call about games and learning while dancing in a teen-DJed dance party. Philip Rosedale, the CEO and founder of Second Life, came to GK Island but used our Global Kids Group IM chat to talk with us about the past, present, and future of the teen grid. We have streamed in live video feeds from events like the National Youth Leadership Council conference and a MacArthur Foundation press conference, and live audio exclusive to Second Life from Mia

Farrow and a representative of the American Jewish World Service, on two separate occasions, each speaking about the crisis in Darfur.

Movie screenings
Any QuickTime movie can be shown in Second Life. Global Kids has shown video clips created by teens at the annual National Youth Leadership Council conference, screened videos on child soldiers made by our after school machinima students, and shown UNICEF videos made by teens about global children's rights.

Role play
The ease with which gender, race, and more can be changed in Second Life creates excellent opportunities for using role play to educate about a topic. In our game about racism and prison medical research, the player puts on an avatar and outfit of a prisoner. To educate about poverty and hunger, contestants in the UNICEF A World Fit For Children Festival offered visitors an avatar to wear of a homeless street child.

Architecture
Sometimes the writing is literally on the wall. To teach their fellow peers about child sex trafficking, youth in our summer camp created a maze that contained text and photos to teach about the issue. The U.S. Holocaust museum photo exhibit on Darfur used the replica of the museum itself to send an implicit message about genocide. Our melting glacier, on loan from the NOAA, allows teens to experience the impact of global warming through a simulation.

T-shirts and accessories
To raise awareness of the crisis in Darfur we received permission and created the official SL-version of the Save Darfur wristbands. To promote awareness of the maze against child sex trafficking, participants received a t-shirt that read "Slavery Still Exists" and a ball and chain to drag behind one's leg that read "I am wearing this to raise awareness about child sex trafficking."

Panel discussions and debates
Using our lightbulb system for self-organizing discussions, we often hold discussions and debates amongst teens, such as on the proper role of adults in online teen spaces, or on issues like gun control.

Create machinima
Use Second Life to make an animated movie. Global Kids machinima programs have created videos about digital media, child soldiers, and children's rights, with each forcing the teens to properly understand their subject in order to make not just the script, but also the sets, props, costumes, and more.