(Note: All external links below will open in a new browser window or tab.)

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *CultureWork* explores the Do-it-yourself (DIY) aspect of Second Life (**http://secondlife.com/**) the virtual online world. Second Life has both its champions and critics, but one cannot deny the interest generated from around the world in this new Web forum for personal and organizational exploration and networking.

Second Life is best described as a 'non-game' gaming style environment where individuals create personalized avatars (**1**) and meet with others in a variety of forums. Linden Labs (Linden Research, Inc. **http://lindenlab.com/**) has created Second Life as a commercial venture, but one can sign up and explore the world for free. Second Life also offers the opportunity to create your own world, or according to the Linden Labs Web site:

> From the moment you enter the World you'll discover a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity. Once you've explored a bit, perhaps you'll find a perfect parcel of land to build your house or business.(**2**)

We want to consider how organizations use Second Life virtual spaces. Many organizations from IBM to Home Depot to Playboy to the NBA have a presence within Second Life. In contrast to the

commercial aspects of this virtual world, a large educational and non-profit presence also exists. Universities and academic libraries are presenting classes, book groups, seminars, and conferences (3).   The DIY aesthetic of creating an organization within a space that allows for low overhead is equally intriguing.

As such this issue of *CultureWork*'s DIY series introduces an organization using Second Life to create itself from the ground up in a fully online environment. We have approached the group The Heron Sanctuary (THS) because of their work with people with disabilities, (physical, mental, and emotional) and the fact that this group is wrestling with start-up organizational issues. THS recently celebrated their first open house (September 15 - 16, 2007) and has begun to address questions of outreach, programming, member base, and board development.

> The Heron Sanctuary is a project in Second Life [SL] to develop and sustain a supportive community for disabled people both already in SL and those who want to enter it. Just as in the real world, disabled people face access barriers in joining and participating in SL. The Sanctuary project is designed to provide the assistance disabled people need.
>
> The Sanctuary officially began on June 29, 2007 when groundbreaking occurred on EduIsland 4. The project erected a building and several auxiliary structures, such as a swimming pool. Many volunteers assisted in the construction process. We continue to make progress using the donations and skills of many interested people. (Heron Sanctuary Newsletter #1, 2007, August 1)

Another level of interest for us in the field of virtual spaces and organizational structure is the use of digital arts as forms of personal expression for THS members. This interview features samples of THS co-founder SuperQuiet Heron's digital and analogue photography along with poetry that comes from a THS supported publication. We see a very strong DIY influence in work such as this and have been intrigued by the possibilities that digital online worlds offer individuals to self publish and distribute their work.

We thank Gentle Heron for her agreement to take part in introducing us to The Heron Sanctuary.
Jump to various snapshots of The Heron Sanctuary by clicking here.

Robert and Julie Voelker-Morris, co-editors

THE HERON SANCTUARY: An Interview with Gentle Heron

What is the Heron Sanctuary?

The Heron Sanctuary is a planned supportive community [within Second Life] for people with all kinds of disabilities. Our members consist of people with disabilities and those without who have already become members of Second Life, and new Second Life members with disabilities who need assistance overcoming barriers that might prevent their full participation in this virtual reality environment.

When I visited with you previously, you said that the Heron Sanctuary not only addressed physical disabilities, but also mental/emotional ones. Can you elaborate on some examples?

We have members with several kinds of mental or emotional disabilities. These range from autism spectrum disorders to bipolar disorder to learning disabilities to social anxiety disorders. Many people with physical disabilities such as multiple sclerosis also have mental symptoms such as depression, memory loss, and impulse control issues.

What do the SL spaces offer that "real life/real time" spaces cannot offer to the disabled community?

Much depends on the nature of the disability. Virtual reality offers benefits to many people with disabilities for whom it can be adapted. For instance, people with mobility disabilities such as cerebral palsy or para- or quadriplegics benefit from navigating through the rich 3-D environment. They improve their spatial awareness as the realistic graphical interface allows them full mobility, even flight, with minimal physical effort.

Certain disabilities affect attention span. The detailed scenery and opportunities for realistic interactions with representations or avatars of other humans capture the interest and focus the attention of persons with attention disorders such as ADHD. People with autism spectrum disorders may be confused or angered by the facial expressions or gestures of those with whom they must interact face-to-face. However, text chatting with an avatar allows our members with Asperger's syndrome as well as

others whose disability renders them non-speaking to converse comfortably in new ways.

Many Wheelchairs

Not many wheelchairs on the stage
Doesn't matter whatever the age
Look only for pretty faces
Abled not disabled that disgraces

What is wrong with us out there?
Don't you like the look, why do you stare?
Are we so different to you all?
We are proud and we don't crawl

There are lots of us doing many things
But look around not many that sings
Or on the stage, nor many films seen
Being made about us, you know what I mean

So I have no more to say about how I feel
In time all our lives will be more ideal.

©SuperQuiet Heron

How large is the member base? What are your plans for the future, as in what size of membership are you looking towards over the next year?

Our present membership is just over 70. The nondisabled population of our group now outnumbers the disabled population. The effort expended in integrating one disabled new member into the general culture of Second Life precludes a faster growth of the total disabled population of our group at the present time.

In general, what types of outcomes are you hoping to achieve for both disabled and non-disabled members (and non-members) of the Heron Sanctuary?

We hope that all citizens of Second Life will become more aware of disability access issues and the technological tools and adaptations that allow people with disabilities

to become fully functioning members of Second Life.

What type of public programs is the Heron Sanctuary planning to offer after the grand opening?

After the Open House, the Sanctuary will cosponsor programs with the Accessibility Center (4). These will focus on specific disability issues, how people with those disabilities can benefit from participating in virtual reality, and the types of assistive technology that will allow them to participate as fully as possible.

How is the Heron Sanctuary using the arts and culture (performance, visual, literary,…) as part of your programming?

We encourage our members to express themselves through whatever artistic medium they feel comfortable with. Many are casual writers. Some explore SL photography or sculpture. We can all attend concerts and museum exhibits in SL. Members whose creative talents become adequately developed may even find a retail outlet for their products in SL.

Is the Heron Sanctuary working in collaboration with other Second Life groups? Any future plans for collaboration?

The Sanctuary collaborates with a number of SL institutions.
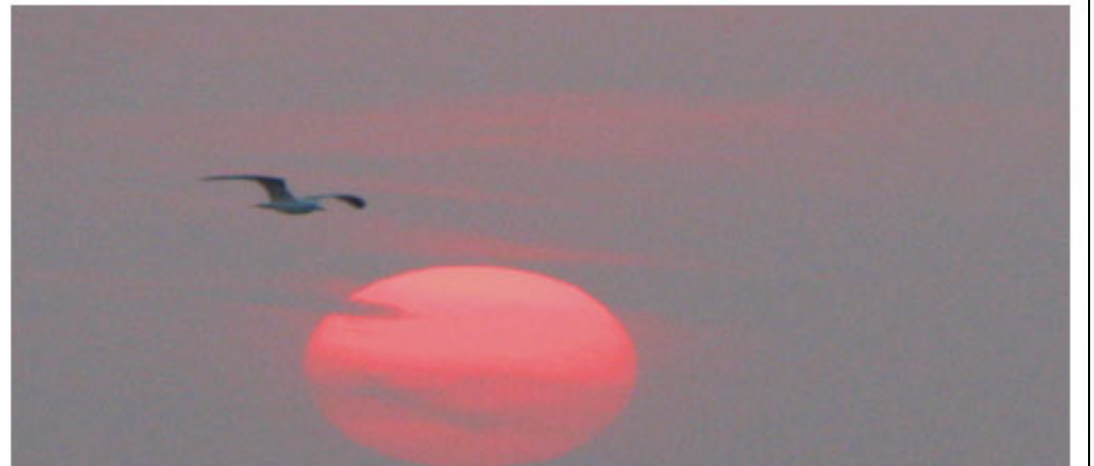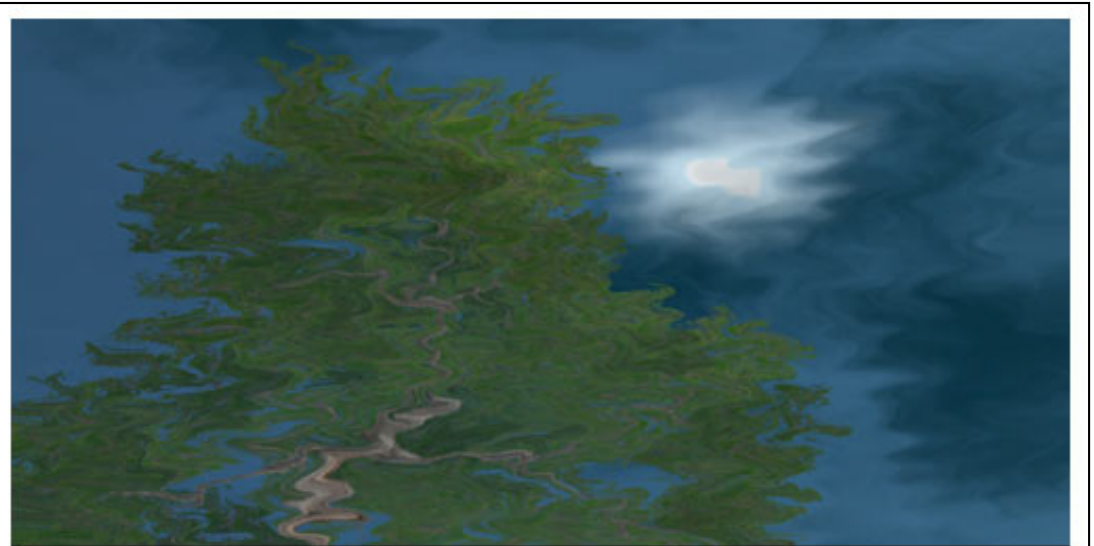
The Accessibility Center fulfills much of the education function initially envisioned for the Sanctuary. There are many groups in SL that support individuals with specific types of disability, such as Survivors of TBI, Shock Proof (stroke survivors), Depression Support Group, and Asperger's Awareness ([5]). When a new member has moved through the generic intake process, he or she is referred to the appropriate disability-specific support group for continuing support.

Top: Shimmering Tree
Bottom: Gull
© SuperQuiet Heron

Cat and Rat

The cat sat on the rat
And the rat was less than happy
Well I can understand why
If it were you, would you be happy
Mind you I am sure some of us have been there
Or maybe some fat rat has done it to you
Then of course the cat had the right idea.

©SuperQuiet Heron

What is the value of technology and online artistry for the disabled community? What are some desired outcomes for this artistry?

Technology allows people with disabilities to participate in a community, to express themselves through various forms of art, and to interact with others having similar interests. We have a new member who was a professional sculptor before his stroke. He cannot work in marble now, but he can learn to "torture prims" ([6]) and create all kinds of 3-D forms in Second Life. Another new member is learning to make clothing with disability themed fabric. Her jumpsuit featuring images of wheelchairs is quite fashionabl [see the slide show of MoonFish Loon's design below].

What are the challenges posed by using an environment such as Second Life (a virtual world)?
Are there technical issues that influence levels of accessibility?

Second Life is a mirror of Real Life. In some ways, the barriers to community participation that exist for people with disabilities in Real Life also exist in Second Life. In fact, in some instances, the technology of virtual reality adds new barriers. For instance, a new member who is a stroke survivor and typing with one hand has difficulty using the DRAG mouse function and the arrow keys on the opposite side of his keyboard.

Do you feel these challenges are reflective of larger issues found outside the SL world? As in, have you encountered situations in which SL reinforces pre-existing barriers found in lived culture?

Remembering that behind every avatar there is a real live person, the same emotional entanglements and communication misunderstandings that can occur in Real Life also occur in Second Life. Just as in real life disabled people may become crime victims because they are perceived as weak and therefore easy targets, several of our members have recently been targeted by griefers([7])in Second Life.

What aspects or features of SL break down these barriers? Do you see that members of the Heron Sanctuary actively embrace these features of SL?

Many essential functions in the human-software interface can be accomplished in multiple ways. Most of our members are quite adept at experimenting, reading directions, and exploring the many instructional resources available within SL. We believe that, in the Sanctuary, we are all teachers and we are all learners. When one of our members finds a new work-around, it quickly passes on to others who share the same accessibility needs.

How is the Heron Sanctuary exploring other web technologies (blogging, wikis, etc.) for outreach and member participation?

The Heron Sanctuary website (www.theheronsanctuary.info) is set up as a wiki to encourage participation by group members. Members have created blogs to share their developing written works. Several of our members share photos taken inside Second Life through

external photo-sharing sites (**8**).

How does one find the Heron Sanctuary within SL?

The Heron Sanctuary is on EduIsland 4. It can be found through SEARCHing for the group name.
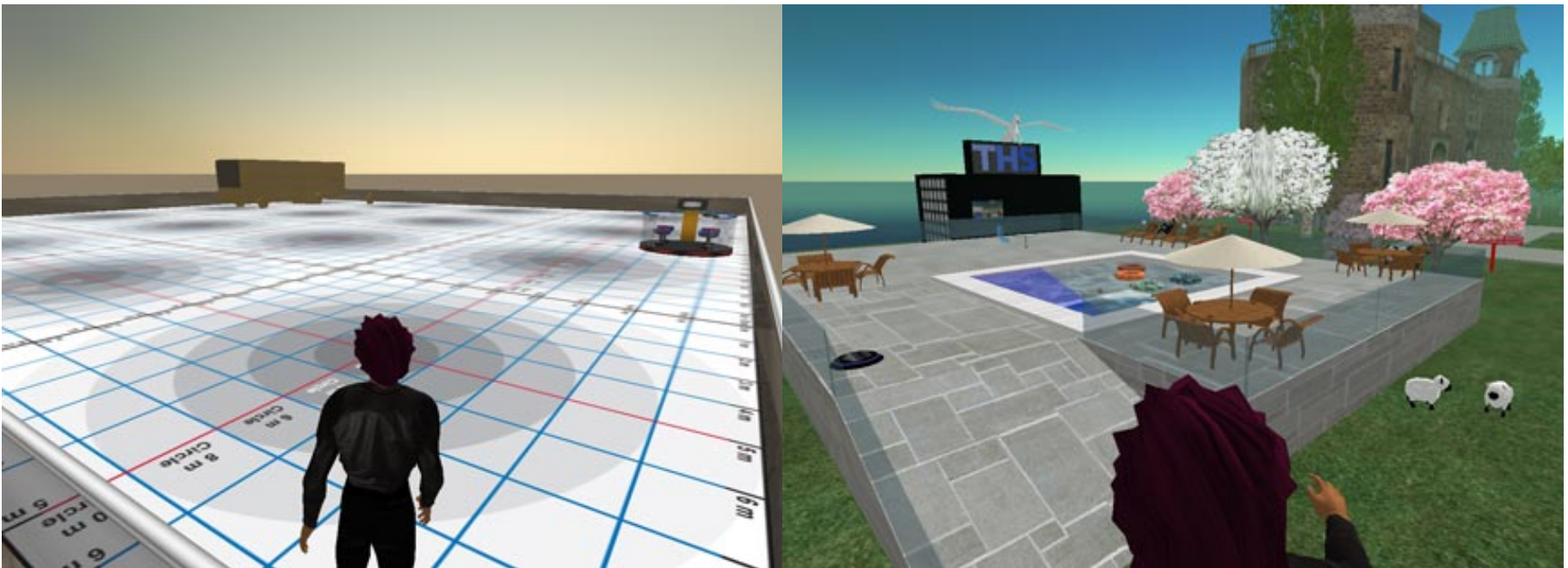
Any closing comments you want to make about the Heron Sanctuary?

We would like to thank all the volunteers and donors who make this project successful.

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Snapshots

Images:Left to Right/Top to Bottom: 1) Front Entrance, 2) Lobby, 3) Skybox/Sandbox, 4)Pool

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Editor Notes

1. Avatars are 3-D or 2-D digital representations of an individual utilized in forums such as virtual worlds, discussion boards, instant messaging, Myspace, blogs, and computer games. These representations can be complex three-dimensional human or animal figures that can move about the digital environment they are created in or two-dimensional icons that are static figure or abstract representations. See:

- **Second Life: Create an Avatar - http://secondlife.com/whatis/avatar.php**

- **Yahoo! Avatars - http://messenger.yahoo.com/avatars.php**

- **iconator.com (Buddy icons, avatars, aim icons and display pictures for use with AIM, Yahoo**

IM, MySpace and MSN.) - http://www.iconator.com/

(All above links retrieved September 21, 2007.)

2. Retrieved, September 21, 2007, from http://secondlife.com/whatis/.

3. One specific example at the University of Oregon is the Center for Advanced Technology in Education (CATE, http://cate.uoregon.edu/) which has a Second Life presences on Eduisland. For more information about the University of Oregon's use of Second Life see: http://www.eugeneweekly.com/2007/05/17/coverstory.html (retrieved September 21, 2007).

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4. "The Accessibility Center provides continuing education and awareness about disabilities to the residents of and visitors to SL. The information available at the Center includes material about specific types of disabilities, accessibility in electronic games and virtual worlds, as well as assistive technology in the real world." (Pasteur, E. (2007, September 6). HealthInfo Island adds accessibility materials. *Second Life Insider*. Retrieved September 13, 2007, from http://www.secondlifeinsider.com/2007/09/06/healthinfo-island-adds-accessibility-materials)

5. For a comprehensive listing of Second Life Disability Resources see: http://www.theheronsanctuary.info/wiki/index.php?title=SL_Disability_Resources (retrieved September 21, 2007).

6. Prims in Second Life are the shapes one can create/design using the editing interface. "In Second Life, virtual physical objects such as cars, houses, jewelry, and even less obvious things like hair are made out of one or more primitive parts called prims. Objects made from prims are usually created in-world using the built in object editing tool. "(Retrieved September 28, 2007, from http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Prim) Prim torture is going beyond the SL interface's standard attribute choices and creating shapes that are complex and require expert editing skills. "Prim torture is the art of using shape changes to produce shapes that are otherwise impossible" (Retrieved September 28, 2007, from http://rpgstats.com/wiki/index.php?title=LibraryPrimTorture).

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7. Griefers are organized groups and unorganized individuals found within Second Life. Their purpose is to disrupt and disturb interactions that happen within Second Life.

For a detailed account of griefer activity in Second Life see : Nino, T. (2006, November 3). Who are the griefers? *Second Life Insider*. Retrieved September 21, 2007, from http://www.secondlifeinsider.com/2006/11/03/who-are-the-griefers/

8. Online photo-sharing inlcudes such examples as Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/), Picasa Web Album (http://picasaweb.google.com/), and Fotki Photo Sharing and Printing (http://www.fotki.com/us/).

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Gentle Heron: In Second Life, I am still relatively new, residing here less than half a year. I am one of three co-founders of a group called The Heron Sanctuary. We are all disabled.

In Real Life I am a mother of three children in college. I am an editor and technical writer for a national educational research company, and I am challenged daily by multiple sclerosis.

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Arts and Administration | Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy

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