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Foundation With Real Money Ventures Into Virtual World

By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

For the first time, one of the nation's largest foundations is venturing into virtual worlds to play host to activities and discussions and explore the role that philanthropy might play there.

The foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. [MacArthur Foundation](#), is sponsoring events in Second Life, the online world.

The goals are to gain insight into how virtual worlds are used by young people, to introduce the foundation to an audience that may have little exposure to institutional philanthropy and to take part in and stimulate discussions about the real-world issues that it seeks to address.

"This is not just some fad or something new and interesting that we've grabbed onto," said Jonathan Fanton, MacArthur's president. "Serious conversations take place there, people are deeply engaged, and that led us to think that maybe a major foundation ought to have a presence in the virtual world as well."

Second Life says it has more than seven million members, about one-third of them Americans. Each member uses a virtual self, known as an avatar, to navigate the virtual world.

The MacArthur foundation, perhaps best known for the so-called genius grants it hands out each year, has given the Center on Public Diplomacy of the [University of Southern California](#) \$550,000 to stage events in Second Life, including discussions of how foundations can address issues like migration and education.

In one such event today, Mr. Fanton, whose avatar in Second Life is known as Jonathan MacFound, is going to discuss the role of philanthropy in virtual worlds with Philip Rosedale, the founder and chief executive of Linden Labs, the company that produces Second Life.

In an interview, Mr. Fanton said MacArthur planned to eventually open an office in a virtual world and make grants through it that will become actual grants in the real world. "We're still figuring out how to do that," he said. "All of this is a learning experience."

Mr. Rosedale said making grants in the virtual world offered a way for foundations to explore concepts and develop programs before rolling them out. "You can start things very cheaply in Second Life, play with them and let them germinate, and then put more behind them if and when they take off," he said.

Charities and other nonprofit groups are also beginning to migrate into the so-called metaverse, seeking ways of attracting new donors and hoping to educate a broader audience about the issues they address.

Adventure Ecology, a British group, staged a virtual flood in Second Life to show what [global warming](#) might bring, and a psychiatry professor at the [University of California](#), Davis, created a way for his students to



experience in Second Life what a person with schizophrenic hallucinations experiences.

"It's a wonderful awareness-building tool," said Beth Kanter, a nonprofit consultant. "You can walk someone through an experience there or sit down with them to discuss the work you're doing in a way that you can't in the real world or on the Web."

The [American Cancer Society](#) has had success in raising real money with virtual walkathons in Second Life. Randal Moss, the society's manager of innovation-based strategies and futurist, established an avatar in Second Life in 2004 — "It looks pretty much like me, maybe a little bit more muscular, with a little better haircut," he said — and quickly noted that another avatar, named Jade Lily, was holding a silent auction to raise money for a charity.

His avatar, R. C. Mars, talked to Jade Lily and persuaded her to head a virtual Relay for Life, as the cancer society's walkathons are known. A few hundred avatars did that walk in 2005, raising \$5,000. This year's walk has raised \$82,000 at a cost of \$4,200 — and it will not take place until the end of next month.

The benefits go beyond dollars. "We benefit by increasing brand awareness," Mr. Moss said. "We've opened an office in Second Life, and through that, we will provide health information, link back to our Web site and provide space for community-based support groups to meet."

More than 30 nonprofits have opened offices in a virtual business incubator in Second Life called the Nonprofit Commons that is operated by TechSoup, a group that helps other nonprofits with technology.

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