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Virtually improving real living

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When I ask my university students about how to improve American cities, nobody ever says: "Let's play a computer game." But that's exactly what a growing number of civic entrepreneurs are doing. They are using the unprecedented technology now available online through Massively Multiplayer Online Games.

Linden Lab's program "Second Life," with more than 8 million subscribers, is by far the most popular and powerful of these MMOGs as a gaming environment and a place where people engage in both virtual work and play.

Although the social and entertainment value of MMOGs has been well known for years, only now can we harness the power of these virtual environments to better the real world. In three dimensions and served live 24/7 on the Internet, Second Life virtual places have the potential to advance civic life in real places. In the '90s, the ability of the World Wide Web to connect distant people, across the globe, instantaneously was touted as a remedy for many civic ills. Second Life is in many senses the next generation of the World Wide Web and as its successor provides new and potent ways to advance civic life in unimaginable ways.

Across the country, small and large initiatives are under way in Second Life to improve real places in the real world. While originally conceived of as games, MMOGs are being used as much more than games, but instead as platforms for learning, working and virtual living. In June, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, announced a major philanthropy initiative in Second Life including a series of virtual conferences with real foundations. The American Cancer Society is organizing its second annual "Relay for Life" virtual walk in Second Life; so far they have raised more than \$80,000. In Paris, a neighborhood association is holding a design competition in Second Life to try to influence the mayor's plans for redevelopment of center city gardens.

In my own urban planning course at Tufts University, students developed redevelopment ideas for the distressed Forest Hills neighborhood of Boston. The students logged onto the Second Life Web site, where they registered by creating an avatar -- a virtual representation of one's self. Some students chose avatars that resembled them, but not all did: One white female senior took the appearance of an elderly Asian-American male. The Second Life "metaverse" (as it is called) is a platform on which users create virtual developments: homes, businesses and entertainment complexes. In the class, we spent time traveling the metaverse and found virtual models created by Second Life users of Times Square, John Edwards' campaign headquarters and a headquarters for Reuters News Service. We bought our own 16-acre plot of land and built a virtual model of the Forest Hills neighborhood. Then, the students developed their redevelopment ideas for the site and modified the virtual model.

We shared the redevelopment ideas for Forest Hills "virtually" with local community leaders and were able to generate a "real" dialogue on the neighborhood's future. Community activists and political leaders can walk through this virtual model of the real Forest Hills and experience the redevelopment ideas in a profound way. Second Life cannot only provide new and exciting avenues for genuine public participation in civic affairs, but it has the potential to change the very nature of civic involvement through greater intimacy and enhanced communication.

Whether it's Paris, Boston or your hometown, Second Life now provides an opportunity for community members to discover new ways to engage in the affairs of their cities -- this is an exciting time in history for us to invent innovative forms of civic life in our cities.

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