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Second Life avatar: Glitteractica Cookie

The following paper describes the role, history, and expected impact of The Nonprofit Commons in Second Life, a project of TechSoup. It is submitted as additional background material in support of Susan Tenby's testimony before the US Congress, Subcommittee on the Telecommunications and the Internet on April 1, 2008.

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An Introduction to The Nonprofit Commons in Second Life

Project Description

Nonprofits are continually looking for effective, low-cost ways to engage and serve their constituents, advocate for their causes, raise money, and run their organizations more efficiently. So, it is no surprise that they have started tapping into the community-building, outreach, and fundraising potential of newly emerging "virtual worlds." Numerous virtual worlds exist in the Web sphere, but Second Life (or "SL") has rapidly emerged as the leading virtual world for nonprofits around the world—frequently providing a platform for a wide range of nonprofit-hosted activities:

- A humanitarian aid worker returned from Sudan describing the plight of Sudanese refugees to an international audience.

- A fundraising gala and silent auction for cancer research attended by well-heeled patrons bidding on shimmering gowns.

- Regulars at a weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting sitting in a loose circle and helping each other through another day of sobriety.

- Teenagers creating sets, costumes, and lighting to shoot an educational video about child soldiers in Uganda.

These relatively routine nonprofit activities are occurring in a virtual world that exists without geographic restrictions and that can vastly increase each participant's ability to share their ideas and meaningfully connect with potential partners, mentors, volunteers, and funders.

The first and largest nonprofit-specific learning community in SL, The Nonprofit Commons, facilitates access to this technology and empowers even the smallest nonprofits to "virtually" operate at their fullest potential in SL. The group has grown into a vibrant, cooperative community that offers free virtual office space for 71 nonprofits, weekly interactive meetings with an average of 50 attendees each, guided tutorials, and

facilitated discussions about outreach, fundraising, activism, and volunteering in the virtual world. The Nonprofit Commons has already achieved broad appeal with interest from organizations from 59 countries and a social network that includes engaged members ranging from large international organizations such as the humanitarian group CARE, national-focused groups like America's Second Harvest, and community initiatives such as the Lower Eastside Girls Club of New York. The Nonprofit Commons also offers a listing of nonprofits in SL and a hub that allows one-click teleporting to many nonprofit headquarters throughout SL.

Linden Lab, the creator of SL, considers The Nonprofit Commons digital community to be the primary community of practice for nonprofits in SL and they feature a direct link to The Nonprofit Commons page. The Nonprofit Commons provides a welcoming and orienting presence to nonprofits in SL, the potential of which is just now being realized for the social benefit sector. As summarized by SL avatar, PCOSGurl Infinity from the Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, "It enhances a nonprofit organization's ability to connect, network, and provide service. The opportunities are limitless and the ability to impact the success of our real life organization is amazing." (For additional testimonials, please refer to the end of this paper.)

Project Objectives
The Nonprofit Commons increases the real-world impact of nonprofits by building on the potential of the SL digital platform to share and develop ideas and to foster connections across the nonprofit community. Through a supportive, interactive learning and relationship-building environment, nonprofits learn how to use SL to quickly and easily locate, create, and share resources and information, to network within and outside their communities, to enhance internal and external communications, and to engage their constituency more effectively.

Weekly meeting topics range from technical how-to demonstrations to capacity building tips to issue awareness-raising, as exemplified by this sampling of meeting topics:

- Best Practices for Nonprofits

- Beginners Building Class

- Fundraising Lessons from the American Cancer Society's SL Relay for Life

- Gone Gitmo (a demonstration of what life is like in Guantanamo Bay's Gitmo detention center and prison)

- OneWorld, OneClimate Virtual Bali Conference

- Second Life/Facebook Integration

- Techniques in In-World Audio-Streaming

- Using Emerging Technologies and Virtual Worlds for People with Disabilities

The Nonprofit Commons digital community is comprised of four interactive online sites:

1. <u>Second Life TechSoup Group</u> (http://groups.google.com/group/TechSoup-Second-Life). Managed through a Google Groups account, this site is home to more than 500 members who are interested in how virtual worlds, specifically SL, can assist the nonprofit sector. Members discuss issues pertaining to SL meetings, events, and the building and designing of SL tools.

2. <u>The Nonprofit Commons islands in SL (office spaces and amphitheatre)</u> (http://tiny.cc/QkgzM). The Nonprofit Commons in SL is the virtual world hub for nonprofit networking, information sharing, and structured events. Its amphitheatre is home to the weekly meetings discussed above, in which any SL resident can learn how nonprofits can use the SL platform to increase their real world impact. In addition, free virtual office space is available for up to 71 nonprofit groups. These virtual offices allow nonprofits to create their own presence in SL, promote their cause, and network with potential partners, volunteers, and funders. Currently, The Nonprofit Commons in SL is comprised of two generously donated sims (virtual "islands"). The first sim was donated by Anshe Chung Studios (www.anshechung.com) and the second sim was recently donated by Taking IT Global (www.takingitglobal.org), a nonprofit member of The Nonprofit Commons digital community. Both islands are managed by TechSoup and a group of volunteers with the goal of minimizing access barriers to SL for nonprofits.

3. <u>NPSL Blog</u> (www.nonprofitcommons.org). TechSoup launched the NPSL Blog in May 2006 to provide an additional venue for nonprofit founders, employees, volunteers, and friends interested in SL participation and collaboration. Through the NPSL Blog, TechSoup promotes nonprofit events in SL, records The Nonprofit Commons nonprofit activities, gathers and evaluates best practices for nonprofit SL-based fundraising, community-building, and furthering real-world organizational missions.

4. <u>Nonprofits in Second Life Wiki</u> (http://npsl.wikispaces.com). The Nonprofits in Second Life Wiki allows volunteers to upload and edit resource links, how-to tips, and tracking documents for volunteer roles and activities in support of The Nonprofit Commons. The Wiki provides documentation and other helpful information for The Nonprofit Commons tenants as well as any nonprofit that is interested in learning about SL best practices for social benefit organizations.

<u>Geographical Context</u>
The Nonprofit Commons digital community supports nonprofits who have real-world offices or operations throughout the world. A testament to the community's global reach, The Nonprofit Commons tenant organization list includes nonprofits from Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, France, India, Italy, Japan, Sri Lanka, the UK, and the USA.

The current list of nonprofits with virtual office space in The Nonprofit Commons illustrates the wide range of issues and target communities represented:

America's Second Harvest
AngelAID Foundation
Blossom International
Boomer Esiason Foundation
Breakthrough.tv
Bridges for Women
CARE USA
Center for Civic Education
Cheerful Givers
Child Rights and You
Community Voicemail
Crohn's and Colitis Foundation
Digital Campfires Foundation
Drug Policy Alliance
Equinox Documentaries, Inc.
Faith Foundation
Floaters
Games for Change
Given Gain Foundation
Giving Circles Network
Grants Managers Network

Great Strides
Herstartup
HUMANBE France
Idealist.org
Information Architecture Institute
International Rescue Committee
International Humanities Center
Johnson Center
Kiva
Life Learning Center
Mariners' Museum
Medical Emergency Relief
International
Multiple Myeloma Research
National Council
Neehan Historical Society
Non-Profit Global Network
NSW Animal Rescue
OPhoenix
Partners for Others
Peace Potential

SPCA Humane Society of Port
George
Preferred Family Healthcare
Project Jason
Robert C. Maynard Institute for
Journalism Education
RoSa Library
SGL Philanthropic Services
Small Health Office
Sri Lanka Foundation
Sustainable Harvest International
Taking IT Global
Transgender Resource Center
Virtual Ability
WMNF Public Radio
Women's Festival
Xigi
Yehoodi
Youth Venture

Project History

The Nonprofit Commons was developed and launched by TechSoup, an internationally recognized nonprofit leader in using digital media to build community across a global audience of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations. In 2005, TechSoup Senior Manager, Online Community Development, Susan Tenby, began investigating the potential for nonprofits in SL. Noticing a lack of nonprofit participants, she led the 2006 launch of a TechSoup Group in SL. Clearly tapping an unmet need, several hundred people joined in the first few days (the group now totals nearly 500 members).

While Ms. Tenby was presenting her work at the Second Life Community Convention (SLCC) in 2006, her passion, knowledge, and ultimate vision for the project caught the attention of Guntram Graef, business partner of Anshe Chung, SL's first [US$] millionaire real estate baroness. In support of Ms. Tenby's efforts, Ms. Chung generously donated The Nonprofit Commons first sim, which became The Nonprofit Commons' initial office complex and amphitheatre. Within months, the 32 virtual offices available in this initial island became occupied and, soon after, there was a waiting list of over 20 additional nonprofits seeking virtual office space. Recently, one of The Nonprofit Commons member organizations, Taking IT Global, donated an additional sim to accommodate this demand. With this new sim, The Nonprofit Commons can now offer virtual office space for up to 71 nonprofits. The initial amphitheatre remains home to the wide range of experiential meetings in SL through which nonprofits from around the world have learned about such topics as fundraising, community building, effective online communications, Web strategies, and expanding online social networks. The Nonprofit Commons has hosted these meetings nearly every week since launch; they are regularly attended by representatives from an ever-changing mix of approximately 50 nonprofit representatives in SL.

The Nonprofit Commons has garnered significant media attention including interviews such as the one published in the *MSNBC.com* article entitled "Pixelanthropy: Charities

Tap into Second Life" and the *Online Community Report's* "Expert of the Month." The Nonprofit Commons also has been highlighted in articles featured in the *New York Times, Nonprofit Times, Victoria Times, Contribute Magazine*, and *New Scientist Magazine*. More press highlights are available at http://npsl.wikispaces.com/Press+Coverage.

The Nonprofit Commons also has been showcased at real-world conferences:

- SLCC, San Francisco 2006, Chicago 2007
- Northern California Grantmakers Briefing, San Francisco, 2006
- SuperNova, San Francisco 2007
- Games4Change, New York 2007
- BlogHerSL Conference, 2007
- Online Community UnConference, Silicon Valley 2007
- California Association of Nonprofits Conference, Fall 2007
- Exploring Virtual Worlds for Social Work, Fall 2007
- Faster Cures, conference at Esquire North NYC, Fall 2007
- NTEN's Nonprofit Technology Conference, Spring 2007, Spring 2008

Coming speaking engagements include the Computer Refurbisher's Conference (Spring 2008) and testimony before the US Congress, House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet (April 2008).

Project Team
Susan Tenby, Senior Manager, Online Community Development, TechSoup, is responsible for the strategy and direction for TechSoup's community initiatives, including The Nonprofit Commons in SL. Ms. Tenby runs monthly online community meet-ups, is a frequent conference speaker, and has been interviewed about her work with The Nonprofit Commons by publications with international reach. TechSoup staff members also help to coordinate volunteer involvement and to track usage statistics for The Nonprofit Commons.

In addition to key leadership, vision, and support from TechSoup, much of The Nonprofit Commons success can be credited to a large number of dedicated volunteers who help with everything from scripting, designing, newcomer orientation, outreach, training, and event planning. In all, these volunteers have contributed an estimated 15,000 volunteer hours since launch. When a nonprofit accepts a virtual office space in The Nonprofit Commons, they agree to contribute roughly eight hours per month towards community-building activities, including weekly meeting attendance and interactions on the group's blog and wiki regarding topics such fundraising in SL, building and scripting in SL, and SL how-to tips and best practices. Volunteers also have contributed significant

assistance in technical sim set-up and maintenance. Through continuous communication and sharing with its volunteers and members, TechSoup remains responsive to the nonprofits served by The Nonprofit Commons and credits sustainable community engagement and commitment as a top reason for the success of The Nonprofit Commons.

Lessons Learned To-Date

Although the nonprofit office spaces housed at the The Nonprofit Commons in SL provide an important starting point and information hub for nonprofits, they have not encouraged as much interaction as originally expected. We have found there's a "stumble upon" factor in the way that individuals move through SL. That is, people tend to navigate towards large, open places where other people have congregated and are already interacting. (The SL map shows users where they are located within the SL grid and depicts other avatars near them as green dots. Users can move towards those avatar groups by simply walking or by clicking on those dot-groupings and teleporting to that location.) This phenomenon is in contrast to how users navigate through other types of media—moving towards data or stories, for example—and it appears to be unique to the virtual world experience. In SL, users proceed through the world as they do in real life—based on social interactions.

Similar to the grouping tendency described above, the weekly meetings in SL have emerged as the most effective means of building networks and sharing information for members of The Nonprofit Commons. Information kiosks; landmark-givers teleport hubs (that transport users to a new location); and notecards posted in other sims in other regions of SL also have proven highly effective at increasing the awareness of nonprofit-related events and encouraging participation. In addition, the real-world presence of The Nonprofit Commons has proven to be essential in building awareness of this resource—nearly all conference and speaking engagements have resulted in further media attention and invitations to present this work before funders and at additional conferences.

The connections and lessons occurring in the digital community seem to reinforce its sustainability. As noted in the paper, "Best Practices for Nonprofits in Second Life" (published by Global Kids in 2007, http://tinyurl.com/ysy59v%20), inter-organizational collaboration and the ability to interact with other groups and individuals with similar interests and goals is a strong motivating factor for many nonprofits to stay engaged in SL.

Technological Basis

The Nonprofit Commons digital community leverages several different Web 2.0 community-building and collaboration tools: SL, wikis, blogs, Google groups, and RSS feeds (to feed real-world information directly into SL billboards). This integrated Web presence creates a comprehensive and interoperable digital community that functions

within and across virtual world tools and platforms and allows participants to tap into the growing potential of these technologies and increase their impact in the real world.

Participants, Membership, and Beneficiaries
The Nonprofit Commons digital community supports nonprofit employees, volunteers, and friends of small and large nonprofits all over the world who believe that there is merit and great potential in collaborating and working in SL. Currently, the SL TechSoup Group is home to more than 500 nonprofit members and nearly 60 nonprofits occupy virtual office space in the two SL islands in The Nonprofit Commons.

Thus far, The Nonprofit Commons has helped nonprofits in SL create new partnerships, develop collaborative projects, and host joint events that build community and trust among different organizers. Ultimately, the real-world groups and communities that these nonprofits serve stand to benefit from the increased community-building, advocacy, outreach, and collaboration made possible by this digital community.

Importance for the Nonprofit Sector
It is often said that the nonprofit sector runs several years behind the ever-evolving technology curve. But through The Nonprofit Commons digital community, many nonprofits have vaulted ahead of this curve—perhaps for the first time. This interactive digital community has blazed a trail for nonprofits to improve access and remove barriers to the knowledge, resources, and potential community-building benefits offered by emerging social software, such as virtual worlds.

Examples of the purposes for which nonprofits use Second Life include the following:

- Providing low-cost, low-carbon alternatives to travel for fostering rich personal interactions that go beyond simple, text, voice, and video communications (e.g., OneWorld).
- Breaking down barriers to rich social interaction for persons with disabilities.
- Providing a safe environment for support and recovery services like the Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.
- A few organizations are experimenting with ways to mirror real-world fundraising strategies like American Cancer Society virtual Relay for Life.
- Offering rich experiential education that could not take place in real life, e.g., a virtual tour of working human heart or exploring the moonscape or low Earth orbit at NASA's CoLab.

Knowledge gained from participation in The Nonprofit Commons meetings and events has helped nonprofits increase their organizational capacity and improve technological infrastructure, build replicable tools in-world, organize virtual action and awareness campaigns, and host mixed-reality events that bridge virtual-world communities with

real-world social networking events (through live audio and video feeds that stream both to and from the virtual world) to raise awareness about their missions and causes. SL combines the intensity of video, the interactivity of the Web, and the immediacy of face-to-face discussion to create a rich experience that encourages innovation, self-expression, and relationship-building. The Nonprofit Commons provides the key to help nonprofits unlock SL's potential in support of their communities, their missions, and their vision.

Some Favorite Second Life Locations

Nonprofit, General
Nonprofit Commons: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Plush%20Nonprofit%20Commons/183/125/23
(brief tour: http://npsl.wikispaces.com/brieftour)
Commonwealth Islands: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Commonwealth%20Island/135/30/23
Association Works: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Association%20Works/128/128/0
Democracy Island: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Democracy%20Island/116/220/

Education/Youth
ISTE Islands: http://slurl.com/secondlife/ISTE%20Island/97/75/23
Global Kids on the Main Grid: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Teaching/210/162/25
Info Island: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Info%20Island/108/55/33
Eduisland: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Eduisland/119/119/23
Bowling Green State University: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Bowling%20Green%20State/141/135/25
Rich list of SL educational projects and spaces: http://sleducation.wikispaces.com/educationaluses

Art, Humanities, Media
New Media Consortium: http://slurl.com/secondlife/NMC%20Campus/138/215/43
The Sistine Chapel: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Vassar/174/82/25
Virtual Morocco: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Casablanca/133/83/27
Ars Virtua, New Media Center: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Dowden/8/18/52
The Globe Theatre: http://slurl.com/secondlife/sLiterary/28/29/22

Science
NOAA: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Meteroa/177/161/27/
Spaceflight Museum: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Spaceport%20Alpha/51/70/24
Genome Project: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Genome/138/85/29
Sexual Public Health Sim: http://slurl.com/secondlife/Education%20UK/28/58/23

Participant and Member Testimonials

I thought that the engagement of the SF and SL communities was much more seemless for this event than other mixed reality events I've attended. At least from the perspective of SL. Having meatspace speakers from and in the community definitely makes the experience way more enjoyable!

-- Lyre Calliope (Timothy Moenk), 8/14/07 Mixed Reality Event

SL contacts have resulted in RW donations of surplus equipment. Currently serving more than 200 locations in Wisconsin. Digital Campfires Foundation has connected with SL folks and as a result local corporations have donated almost a semi truck load of monitors and computers. We are working with SHAREwi.org in Wisconsin to technology equip and train folks at more than 200 food distribution sites throughout Wisconsin.

-- Docent Alturas(John Grozik, Digital Campfires Foundation), 9/14/07 meeting

Second Life has given America's Second Harvest the opportunity to increase the awareness of the organization and hunger in America. Our first introduction to Second Life was through a partnership with Kraft Foods. The Nonprofit Commons provides a community to discover how to utilize the virtual world to forward our individual organization's missions. As a result, we have appeared in news articles. The organization supports these efforts and recognizes that virtual philanthropy is still in its infancy.

-- Dan Michel/Jackson, 10/12/07

Bridges for Women Society have received a few small donations, and have nearly 200 visitors since we opened in August, that's 200 people who have learned about our program we would have never reached. We have yet to realize the full potential of incorporating Second Life into our existing on-line program due to lack of computers but the amazing amount of press Bridges have received just by participating in this pilot has been a real bonus we didn't expect. We believe we will only continue to benefit by the publicity. This is our 20th year assisting women who have been abused to return to the workplace and the opportunity provided by the Nonprofit Commons to maintain current with technology is priceless!

-- Buffy Beale/Buffy Bye, 10/12/07

I am rather new to the nonprofit sector, but in the few months I have been working in it I have been amazed by the helpful nature and wonderful service Tech Soup provides. The commercial alternatives are many times not viable within out budget, time and again I have turned to Tech Soup found what we needed to stay running or even improve our productivity.

They also have a great web forum that allows nonprofits to post tech related questions, and in my experience get rapid and informative answers. The forum allows small nonprofits to benefit from the infrastructure of larger nonprofits in the way of IT support, an expensive but necessary service in today's computer driven business world.

The forum actually introduced me to the weekly meetings they have in Second Life; a digital meeting area where individuals have avatars and can meet for 'face to face' interaction. In my case it's a chance to listen to global events and exchange ideas with a global representation of nonprofits. I recently joined a group of three other individuals; we are creating a web based database of nonprofit organizations including the ability to search for specific qualities or goals. Allowing anyone to enter in a few key words and find a nonprofit that fits their needs, and then find out more information (a web site, a Second Life office, or if nothing else a person to

contact). This is one more way they are making global links between nonprofits, creating a global support community, so that we can support our communities with good works.

To summarize, I am amazed and impressed by the services they provide and the links they help build. The agency I work for has local roots and I love that, Tech Soup helps us build those roots though increased productivity, and increased funding in a manner, as well as helping us build external links to exchange ideas on a global level.

-- Noah Chesterman, Central Coast Energy Services