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From left to right: Pele Dryke, aka Shannon Terry of Community Voicemail; Glitteractica Cookie, aka Susan Tenby of techsoup.org; In Kenzo, aka Evonne Heyning of amoration.org; Rik Riel, aka Rik Panganiban of yehoodie.org; (standing) Creech Antwerp, aka Matthew Saunders of Dogstar.Org; (seated in denim jacket) Fletcher Dovgal, aka Ann McGregor of Equinox Documentaries; Unknown avatar with Kiva.org and friend of Jules Boucher, aka Julia Bailey of Kiva.Org; Coughran Mayo, aka Dick Dillon of Preferred Family Healthcare, PFH.Org; JordannVa Voom, aka Jordon L. Moore, of TechSoup.org

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Second Life gets second wind as nonprofits move in—and reach out

BY JANET RAE-DUPREE ✦ PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY EVONNE HEYNING (IN KENZO)

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While helping a friend design his new nightclub, Serene Jewell thought it would be nice to create a quiet “doing good” corner decorated with posters and pamphlets about various nonprofits and their causes. But when she went looking for such materials, she discovered that few groups in her community offered them – or even knew how.

Startled, she sought out a support organization called the Nonprofit Commons to see what its staff might be able to offer. Next thing she knew, she was attending weekly meetings and contributing her time and efforts to a number of community causes. Typical see-a-need, fill-a-need, right?

Not so typical when you know that Jewell is an animated character, her friend’s nightclub exists only inside a computer, and the Nonprofit Commons is a complex of 32 virtual offices on a pleasant little digital island inside an ethereal place called Second Life.

Founded in 2003, this fast-growing virtual community—once largely regarded as the playground of otherwise anti-social computer nerds—has been experiencing a surge in new growth. The site now has some 9 million registered users, with most of them avatars (or virtual “selves” of humans)—though only about 40,000 “in-world” at any one time.

Newcomers tend to spend a few days flying around like gangly, featherless birds before they learn how to teleport to the entertainment and shopping areas of Second Life’s virtual islands. Or they dabble in the virtual world’s more lascivious offerings (fear not, parents; a separate region called Teen Second Life steers clear of the main grid’s “mature” areas). But when it comes to matters of the heart, it turns out that Second Life isn’t that much different from first life. Once the novelty of it wears thin, Second Life residents—including Jewell’s real-world persona, Web site producer Kathleen Watkins—begin to look for greater meaning. “I see a lot of people who are looking for something more in Second Life,” Watkins says. “They want to be engaged in a different way.”

Now they can be. The populist hoopla surrounding this online community in recent months has led multinational brands from Reebok to Toyota to establish beachheads on Second Life to interact with consumers and be part of the next wave in social networking. The nonprofit world is following suit: Second Life now has an office park called the Nonprofit Commons that is filled to

capacity with 32 charities (there is a waiting list to get in), from the avant-garde Transgender Resource Center to the more traditional America’s Second Harvest and CARE USA. There’s also a place called Commonwealth Island (p. 58), where a handful of real-world donors go sometimes to check out the action. It’s pretty empty, for now—mostly just a smattering of technology-prone activists (including real-life philanthropists Bill Gates and AOL founder Steve Case) waiting for the party.

But it won’t be long now, says this online virtual community’s first virtual philanthropist, Anshe Chung—a real estate agent whose virtual land deals have made her the first person to earn \$1 million in real money in Second Life (and, for that, to become the first avatar and Second Life resident to land on the cover of *BusinessWeek*, in 2006). Says Chung, aka Ailin Graef of Wuhan, China: “My long-term vision is that donors, nonprofit organizations and recipients of aid are all able to connect, meet, and collaborate in virtual worlds.” Graef, in a recent interview with *CONTRIBUTE* in Second Life, says there will be a Chinese version of it, called Hipihi, released later this year. It will run on local servers, offer cheaper land, “and have content management practices that more fit the local culture,” Graef says. Oh yes, and it will engage China’s estimated 160 million Internet users and young intellectuals, half of whom are under the age of 30, in a new place of their own design.

Sound far-fetched? Not really. Not anymore. While nobody but Graef seems to be raising very much real money yet in “SL,” interest by charities in the potential of this so-called metaverse to boost membership and funding is spiking. In April, market research firm Gartner predicted that by the end of 2011, 80 percent of active Internet users will have some sort of presence in a virtual world, with Second Life currently one of the most populous.

The emergence of philanthropic interest in this brave new world is also a sign, experts say, of its growing popularity with older professionals—and their growing interest in conceiving ways

“This isn’t just some fad or something new we’ve grabbed onto.”

Jonathan Fanton, President,
MacArthur Foundation

