

More to Second Life than just sex

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Researchers at the University of Toronto and the University Health Network's Centre for Innovation in Complex Care (CICC) have found that a wide array of health-related activity occurs in the 3 dimensional virtual world of Second Life.

Second Life is free for users with basic accounts, and reported over 16 million registered users worldwide in 2008. The web-based platform, which is often associated with pornography and "cheating" spouses, is also used to educate people about illness, train physicians, nurses and medical students with virtual simulations, enable disease-specific support and discussion groups, fundraise real-life dollars for medical research, and to conduct research.

The group found that health-related activities in the [virtual world](#) have significant implications in the real world. Dante Morra, Medical Director of the CICC, says "virtual worlds and the social networks that populate the Internet offer a new domain for healthcare. Although it is early in the development, there is a great opportunity to use these platforms for education, research and even disease surveillance."

Jennifer Keelan, the Principal Investigator on the project, suggests that a major feature for users is the "relative anonymity where patients can seek out information and share health experiences in a safe environment. There is also a great potential for patients to "practice being patients" by virtually experiencing a mammogram or navigating a hospital's virtual ward—they can gain insight into medical procedures and processes to become more informed."

"There is a great opportunity here to understand the design features of social media that make it so appealing and accessible to people," states Leslie Beard, the designer on the team. "Once we understand what pulls people to Web 2.0, we can design and apply more effective communication strategies both within and beyond the Internet."

The group's findings have been published in the open access publication *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (JMIR) and are the basis for the next phase of their project, which looks at using Web 2.0, social media and virtual worlds to conduct academic research and design compelling health communication strategies.

More information: Beard L, Wilson K, Morra D, Keelan J, A Survey of Health-Related Activities on [Second Life](#), *J Med Internet Res* 2009;11(2):e17, www.jmir.org/2009/2/e17/

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