

Crossing global political boundaries

MacArthur Foundation in Second Life

by Surfdaddy Orca



Imagine a world without travel visas —you can instantly teleport to a location where English may or may not be spoken. Or where a French, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese speaker might suddenly appear at your door. Fantasy, you say? Such a place exists today. It is the virtual world of Second Life (SL).

On June 22nd, Jonathan Fanton, President of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation appeared for the first time as an SL avatar along with Linden Lab CEO Philip (Rosedale) Linden. The topic was Philanthropy in Virtual Worlds.

The MacArthur Foundation is familiar to most viewers of public television. It is a private, independent grant-making institution “dedicated to helping groups and individuals foster lasting improvement in the human condition.” Last year, the Foundation launched a \$50 million initiative to help determine how digital technologies “are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life.”

This initiative includes grants to organizations working on human rights and international justice, conservation and sustainable development, housing, juvenile justice, and independent media. Jonathan appeared to an overflow crowd of avatars at a well-organized event that included several overflow sims and a web cast.

Partnering with University of Southern California’s Project on Public Diplomacy and Virtual Worlds (USCPD), the



Jonathan Fanton, President of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



Jonathan Fanton, President of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation addresses the subject of Philanthropy in Virtual Worlds.

MacArthur Foundation will help USCPD encourage virtual world residents “to engage in intercultural dialogues and exchanges in ways conducive to fostering a better understanding between people.”

After Jonathan’s introductory remarks, he and Philip dialogued about virtual worlds technology and civic engagement.

Jonathan asked Philip about his “development trajectory.” Philip said that his dream was “to use a ton of computers to simulate a world.” He said that his initial focus was technology, but that around 2003 he began to see that SL had “an effect on people.” The “idea of the public good” emerged and early residents and Linden Lab employees became excited that SL “is a mission that can improve people’s lives.”

In turn, Phillip asked Jonathan what he hopes to accomplish by coming to SL. Jonathan responded that he

wants to learn about SL, the influence of such technology on young people, and the role of [online] schools “going forward.” He suggested that SL could be a resource for people to “connect to issues and organizations in the real world” and “to work on issues of concern.”

Jonathan said that he sees “a lot of idealism in the virtual world” and that he would like to help migrate it into the real world to “build a more just, humane, and peaceful world.”

Or, as another John once put it:

*Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace*

For more information on upcoming MacArthur Foundation events, join the MacArthur Foundation SL Events group. You can submit your thoughts on philanthropy in Second Life to Jonathan’s blog at: http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/invitation_virtual_world_event_philanthropy/ ☞

John Lennon lyrics copyright EMI Records Ltd. Administered by BMG Music Publishing.