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 Julles 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

pixel-

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

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

anthropy

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 *Business-Week*, 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 intereview 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

Avatar Anshe Chung, aka Chinese businesswoman Ailin Graef, Second Life's first philanthropist and "land" donor of SL's new Nonprofit Commons.

to use this virtual space to attract younger consumers and ideas to their causes.

Ditto private foundations. "This isn't just some fad or something new and interesting that we've grabbed onto," says Jonathan Fanton, president of the MacArthur Foundation, which has given the Center on Public Diplomacy of the University of Southern California $550,000 to stage events in Second Life, including discussions of how foundations can address issues like education. "Serious conversations take place in Second Life," Fanton recently told *The New York Times*. "People are deeply engaged and that led us to think that maybe a major foundation ought to have a presence in the virtual world, as well."

So should more charities, says Randall Moss, a technology strategist for the American Cancer Society, one of the first traditional nonprofits to raise money for a cause in Second Life. Moss established an avatar in Second Life in 2004—R.C. Mars ("it looks pretty much like me, maybe a little bit more muscular," he says) and once there, in Second Life, he met another charity-active avatar named Jade Lily, and persuaded her to organize a virtual Relay for Life, as the cancer society's annual walkathons are known. A couple hundred avatars did that walk in 2005, raising $5,100. About 1,000 avatars showed up in 2006 and raised $40,000. This year's walk in July raised $115,000 from 1,700 participating avatars. "At first, we wondered if it was possible to raise money by engaging a virtual community," Moss told *CONTRIBUTE*. "But we've found that as long as it's a community, it's possible to engage it philanthropically."

Just ask Ogilvy Worldwide's Kathryn Parsons, who helped to craft a recent campaign in Second Life for the UK-based arm of Westport, Conn.-based Save The Children. The nonprofit, with Parsons' help, created a virtual, online 3-D animal pageant in Second Life last fall, called Yak Shack, after it sold out of the real yaks being auctioned on its 2006 holiday Wish List. Hundreds participated in the online event, buying yaks for 1,000 Lindens (the currency in Second Life), or about $3.50 in real money. Each player who bought a yak for a poor family was able to milk, ride, and customize a yak avatar online and take care of it in a virtual yak barn, culminating in a December contest for Best Yak. Save The Children won't say how much the event actually raised (or lost). But it will say the event was, more importantly, about raising awareness in a community that is often hard to reach—and woo. "Engaging with young intellectuals is quite difficult, not just for charities but for everyone," says Parsons. "It seemed like an opportunity not to be missed." Adds Beth Kanter, a nonprofit consultant: "You can walk someone through an experience in Second Life or sit down with them to discuss the work you're doing in a way you can't in the real world or on the Web."

Colleen Macklin, the chair of the digital communications and design lab at Parsons, agrees. "Online, game-like environments offer not just new ways for people to connect," she says. "They also help people understand the power of community in ways they

hadn't before. The significance of virtual environments is their promise as a new medium for social activism."

For Second Life's first nonprofit organizer, Susan Tenby, that promise is already being realized: Every Friday morning, Tenby's avatar—a pink, cat-like creature with a tail called Glitteractica Cookie ("Glitter" to friends), meets up with a small group of other charity-minded avatars on the Nonprofit Commons in Second Life to trade war stories and share fundraising strategies. In mid-August, the Commons officially launched itself to the world with a "mixed-reality" bash conducted both in the group's Second Life space online and in the real-life, San Francisco-based headquarters of TechSoup, a technology nonprofit whose mission is to help traditional nonprofits get up to speed with the Web.

It was an unusual scene: Seventy-five avatars, participating from their human's computers, could see a large video screen broadcasting some of the speeches and presentations taking place in San Francisco, while real-world participants could watch the ongoing interactive chatter between the virtual avatars. Says Tenby, who began organizing nonprofits in Second Life in 2006 for TechSoup: "This is a way for the best and most creative minds in the nonprofit space to talk, under the radar, about how to revolutionize their strategies and their workplaces."

Other regions exist for nonprofits to create a virtual toehold, most notably the forested Camp David-like SIM known as Com-

(Clockwise, from top left)

NONPROFIT COMMONS, an office park and courtyard where 32 charities convene.

BETTER WORLD, an island meeting place for international aid advocates and activists.

CAMP DARFUR, a refugee camp for activists raising funds and awareness to stop ethnic genocide in Darfur.

COMMONWEALTH ISLAND, a forested retreat and meeting place for various environmental groups and philanthropists.

monwealth Island, which hosts small displays for a couple dozen environmental and political activism groups. Another region known as Better World Island is home to a gathering of international aid and awareness groups. Individual efforts within Second Life have included a virtual Camp Darfur, which lets residents experience what it is like to be a refugee; a walk-through tour of a malfunctioning human heart created by the American Heart Association; a profitable "fly-a-thon" to support multiple sclerosis research.

Plant-It 2020, a nonprofit founded by the late singer John Denver, has launched an island on Second Life on which residents can pay 300 Lindens (or $1.11) to plant a tree from among a list of endangered species. For every tree planted on Second Life, Plant-It 2020 will plant the same species of the tree in the real-world rainforest to which it is indigenous. "The island helps charities get past donor fatigue and gives people a chance to have a much deeper relationship with a charity versus simply writing a check and never seeing it again," says Paull Young, a senior account executive at Converseon, a digital communications company working with Denver's charity to promote reforestation.

But while nonprofits have begun traveling into Second Life by the virtual dozen, this new terrain is not easy for newbies to master. Alas, doing good in the real world via a virtual one may sound like fun to newcomers—until they realize that they have to learn how to walk and talk and dress themselves first.

I'm a prime example. To report on the development of philanthropy and nonprofits in Second Life, I needed to create my own avatar persona. I was allowed to make up any first name I wanted, but I had to choose from a lengthy list of often-bizarre last names. Grappling for something familiar, I came up with "Scoop Raymaker" and selected a prefabricated, Barbie-slender avatar template with a distinctly goth fashion sense. After a few tweaks to add a splash of color to my avatar's black outfit, I launched Scoop into the virtual sky—and then promptly fell down.

There's a certain finesse required with the "page up" and "page down" keys to affect a smooth avatar landing. Once you've got your avatar's feet on virtual terra firma, it's time to learn how to walk (arrow keys) without slamming into walls or other avatars. Then

it's time to chat up a virtual stranger; my first attempts at texting another newbie came to naught when I discovered he spoke only Portuguese (not counting the English profanities he flung at me when he discovered I was not also from Brazil).

If landing in Second Life for the first time can be a rude awakening for a newborn avatar, it can be flummoxing at first for a nonprofit organization. Fortunately for philanthropic and nonprofit newcomers, the smiling pink presence of Tenby's avatar arrived in-world before they did. In fact, Tenby herself arrived online before many of these organizations did when she was hired in 2000 by CompuMentor, a San Francisco-based nonprofit technology consultancy, to help launch TechSoup.org, which today serves nearly 500,000 monthly visitors from 190 countries. While still working for CompuMentor, Tenby was invited in 2005 by Linden Lab—Second Life's owner/operator—to become a focus group participant. "I immediately saw the enormous potential of it," she remembers. "It was more of a platform than a game. But when I started looking for non-profits in-world, there were none."

CompuMentor, which works to help charities use technology to reach their goals, agreed to sponsor Tenby as Second Life's first-ever community manager for nonprofits. In May 2006, TechSoup Group in SL debuted to an immediate onslaught of interest. After several hundred people signed on as members in the group's first few days, Tenby quickly realized she would need some sense of virtual "place" to help nonprofits and their eager volunteers find their way in the virtual world.

Unfortunately, virtual land within Second Life costs real U.S. dollars to acquire, as well as monthly payments to maintain it on Linden Lab's servers. Tenby concluded that she would need an entire virtual island, or 16-acre "SIM," to do the job right. To get that, she would need to identify SL's first philanthropist.

Enter avatar Anshe Chung, the first Second Life entrepreneur to earn more than one million real U.S. dollars through her in-world business pursuits. Anshe, arguably as famous in Second Life as Bill Gates is in this one, gained her fortune through shrewd investment in virtual real estate development and design. Based near Beijing, Anshe Chung Studios acquires large blocks of SIMS from Linden Lab, zones them for various types of development, employs

32 Charities in Second Life

NONPROFIT

- America's Second Harvest
- AngelAID Foundation
- Boomer Esiason Foundation
- Breakthrough
- Bridges for Women Society
- CARE USA
- Cheerful Givers
- Child Rights and You (CRY)
- 3Community Voicemail
- Crohn's and Colitis Foundation
- Digital Campfires Foundation
- Equinox Documentaries
- FightHunger.org
- Floaters
- Good Samaritan Group
- HUMANBE
- Idealist.org
- Information Architecture Inst. (IAI)
- International Humanities Center
- International Rescue Committee
- Mariners' Museum
- Medical Emerg. Relief Int'l (Merlin)
- Non-Profit Global Network
- Partners for Others
- Preferred Family Healthcare
- RoSa Library
- Sri Lanka Foundation
- Taking IT Global
- Techsoup
- Transgender Resource Center
- WMNF
- Yehoodi.com

80 artists and programmers to create virtual buildings and landscapes, then resells or leases the virtual space at a profit to Second Life residents eager to own a virtual home or operate a business from a virtual shop or office. In other words, Anshe Chung—whose real name is Ailin Graef—is the world's first virtual land baron.

After hearing about TechSoup's dilemma, she and her (real-world) husband Guntram Graef (known as Guni Greenstein in Second Life) happily stepped up to the philanthropy plate. "The idea of a nonprofit incubator in Second Life appealed to us," she said in a rare in-world interview. (See p. 60) The idea, she said, was to help nonprofit organizations network in Second Life and to help new arrivals from the nonprofit arena integrate into the virtual world. "In the long run, I hope the metaverse will help nonprofit organizations in developed and developing countries to collaborate more easily."

Being Second Life's wealthiest resident has restricted what Anshe can do, however. In December 2006, about a month after her company issued a news release noting that she had become the first online personality to net more than one million real-world dollars, the avatar was driven from a Second Life stage by electronic heckling, known in-world as "griefing." And there are other challenges, including a capacity crunch (only 70 avatars seem to be able to gather at once in any one spot) and concerns over whether the constructs of the real world—such as taxes and copyright laws—should be applied virtually, as well. Most annoying, says Graef, is the Nonprofit Commons' decision to self-regulate by banning teens from its Friday socializers, prompted by the recent appearance of an uninvited avatar, who decided to show up nude.

Graef, though—as others—remain mostly unfazed by this new world's growing pains. It's more important in Second Life, says MacArthur Center director Joshua Fouts, to focus beyond the three vices commonly associated with virtual worlds—sex, gambling and commerce. "We are witness to a transformative moment in our society," he says. "It's new to all of us, experientially, this whole idea of an immersive alternate identity. We have the opportunity now to research something before it's too late, before we've missed how this technology is transforming our culture."

To be sure, Tenby and Graef are just getting started. ◢

SAMPLE

Q&A: Anshe Chung / virtual philanthropist

CONTRIBUTE's Janet Rae-Dupree created a digital "self"—an avatar called Scoop Raymaker—to enable her to explore Second Life and interview its first philanthropist, virtual real estate tycoon Anshe Chung. Rae-Dupree was typing into Second Life from a PC in Los Angeles; Anshe Chung's real-world persona, Chinese businesswoman Ailin Graef, was typing into Second Life from her computer in Wuhan, China. They met in a virtual art gallery in Second Life for their interview one night in July. What follows is an edited transcript of that other-wordly exchange:

[22:01] SCOOP RAYMAKER: Hi! Where shall I meet you?

[22:02] ANSHE CHUNG: One moment...

[22:02] SCOOP: Okay.

[22:11] SCOOP: I'm just beginning to see the fabulous details of this gallery. When I teleported in, you were right in front of me, but not fully rendered.

[22:13] ANSHE: Where are you connecting from now?

[22:13] SCOOP: I'm in Los Angeles at the moment, working on a friend's computer. You're in Beijing, yes? Can you see me seated beside you?

[22:14] ANSHE: I am in Wuhan. Your avatar is now loading on my screen. Ah, now there you are :-)

[22:15] SCOOP: Wonderful! I am writing a story for *CONTRIBUTE* magazine about philanthropy in Second Life. My research thus far indicates that you are Second Life's first real philanthropist, donating the SIM (digital land) for the Nonprofit Commons. I wanted to get a better understanding about why you did that.

[22:17] ANSHE: I think there are people who have done much (in SL) for other good purposes, such as fundraising for cancer projects.

[22:18] SCOOP: Yes. But that has been more of a group effort. Your donation seems to be the largest individual contribution to date.

[22:20] ANSHE: When I first came to Second Life, it was trying to raise funds for a boy in a developing country. His name was Geo and I sponsored him through a German nonprofit using Linden $ (the currency of SL). I think positive change is important and I like to help a little bit when I see I can. The idea of a nonprofit incubator in Second Life appealed to me and my husband.

[22:21] SCOOP: Why?

[22:23] ANSHE: When it comes to virtual worlds and virtual world economies, I always saw that primarily as some globalization medium to create more democratic access to the economy for people in different places. That I would end up building a big business myself was not exactly planned. It surprised me.

[22:26] ANSHE: Guni's family (my husband) had some history of doing philanthropy in RL (real life), so I thought it might be a good idea to try to see if a virtual world could create enough value to pay for one person. At the time, I felt that if I could achieve this, then maybe people from developing countries could connect to Second Life and do this, too.

[22:26] SCOOP: So, by sponsorship you mean that you paid for his daily needs—food, housing, education? Are you still involved with him?

[22:27] ANSHE: Yes. He doesn't need sponsoring anymore because his father found a job in the Philippines and can support the family again.

[22:28] SCOOP: How long had you been on Second Life before you helped Geo?

[22:29] Anshe Chung giggles.

[22:29] ANSHE: No, I did not have this idea when joining SL. There were other things, like curiosity, that brought me here.

[22:29] SCOOP: Like most people here.

[22:29] ANSHE: But after I arrived, I began earning Linden $ on the first day.

[22:30] SCOOP: I see. Were you looking for a group to help you sponsor nonprofits?

[22:31] ANSHE: Guni and I have been involved with the Chinese Internet. Actually, this project is what brought us together. For 20 years, we've tried to use the network to help China develop and create jobs. I was not really actively looking. It just happened that there was some contact, in part via Guni.

[22:36] SCOOP: What do you think of what the Nonprofit Commons has become so far? Are you considering expanding it into additional SIMS at some point?

[22:38] ANSHE: I think it is working well. The idea was to help nonprofit organizations to network in SL and to easily integrate new arrivals during their first steps in SL. In the long run, I hope that the metaverse (virtual world) will help nonprofits in both developed and developing countries to more easily collaborate. My ultimate hope is to have people like Geo (or his parents) participating in virtual worlds so they can be in direct contact with potential donors.

[22:39] SCOOP: What has your real-world experience of nonprofits been? I'm under the impression that philanthropy isn't much a part of China's or Germany's culture. Do you see SL

"I want donors and nonprofits to meet and collaborate in virtual worlds."

helping to expand nonprofit activity globally?

[22:40] ANSHE: Both Germany and China have rich cultures of philantrophy and nonprofit organizations. I have relatives who are very involved in fighting for women's rights and against poverty in the Chinese countryside.

[22:41] ANSHE: The difference between China and the US is maybe there are more nonprofit government organizations than non-government organizations doing development.

[22:43] SCOOP: Do your activities in SL create more interest in nonprofits and philanthropy?
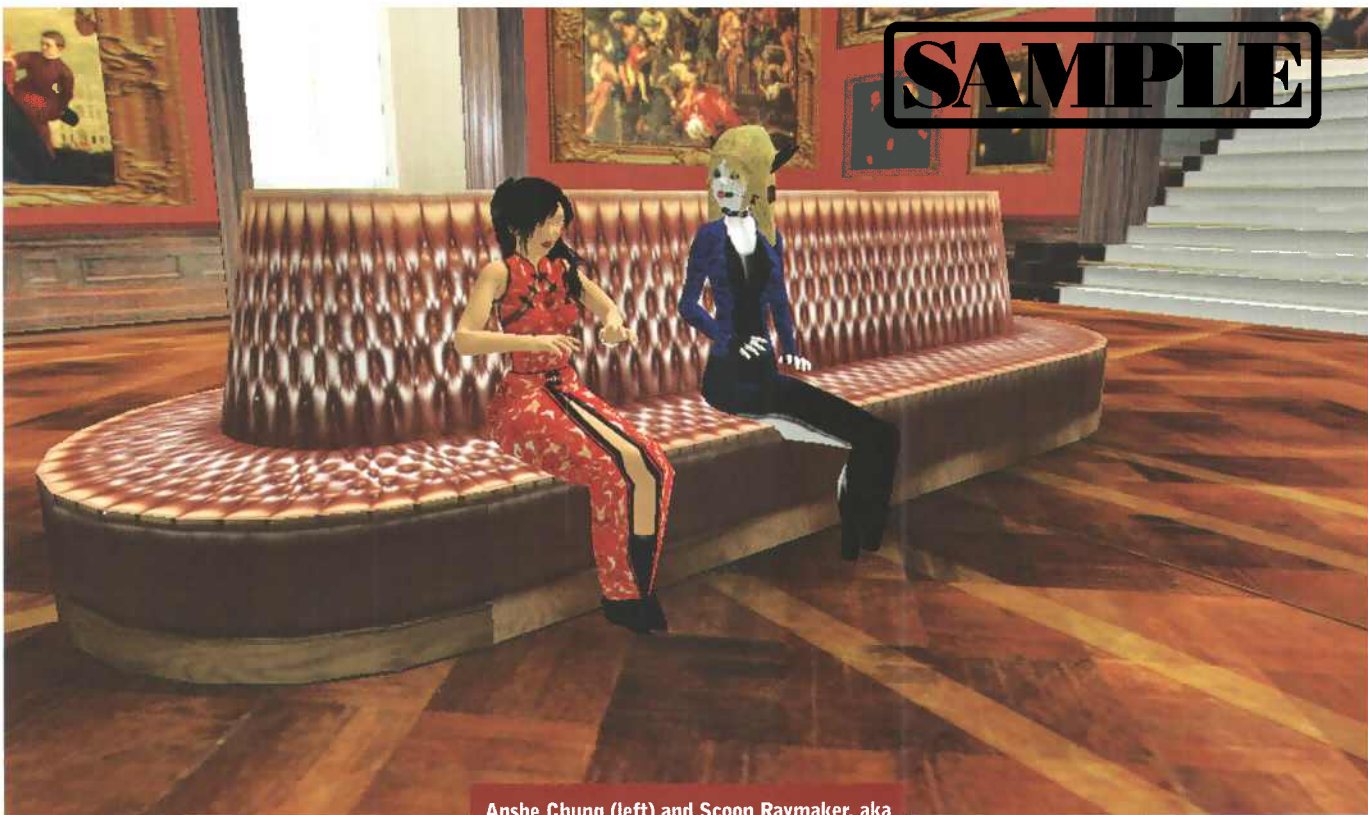
Anshe Chung (left) and Scoop Raymaker, aka *Contribute*'s Janet Rae-Dupree, conversing in the Dresden Gallery in Second Life.

[22:44] ANSHE: Yes, some. But you know, when you look at how people describe me—"real estate tycoon"—you don't immediately think of nonprofit projects.

[22:45] SCOOP: True. But that's why I want to understand more about why and how you're pursuing philanthropic work.

[22:54] ANSHE: I hope that both nonprofits and businesses will come to better understand the potential of using virtual worlds for global collaboration. I hope businesses will get more involved in helping NGOs and nonprofits.

[22:55] SCOOP: How do you see this evolving over the next year or two?

[22:58] ANSHE: My long-term vision is that donors, nonprofits and aid recipients all will be able to meet and collaborate in virtual worlds.

[22:58] SCOOP: That seems to be evolving in the Nonprofit Commons. Do you think your philanthropic example will encourage others to donate their time and money to worthy causes?

[23:01] ANSHE: Possibly. I think there are a lot of people who want to help and feel encouraged when they see that others are doing something. But it's important to do it in a way that has some sort of seed effect, supporting something that develops an internal dynamic.

[23:02] SCOOP: What other philanthropic efforts are you considering?

[23:03] ANSHE: I'm considering some real life projects at the moment,but it's still too early to talk about them.

[23:04] SCOOP: Can you give me some clues?

[23:04] ANSHE: What I have been doing a lot recently is funding small virtual businesses with risk capital. That doesn't fall into the nonprofit category, but for me it is almost like that, given the lack of security in the financing system of SL. I think I am probably the first who has done virtual VC on a large scale. I did not invent the concept, even though from the beginning I would actively support virtual stock exchange projects.

[23:08] SCOOP: Is SL popular in China?

[23:08] ANSHE: Not very. But when Hipihi will be released, the metaverse in China will become popular. Hipihi is the Chinese version of Second Life.

[23:08] SCOOP: Do you think philanthropy will grow in Hipihi the way it is in SL?

[23:12] ANSHE: Yes, I expect even more such activity there, given that many nonprofits in China have a strong member base of teenagers. The release is scheduled for the end of this year.

[23:18] SCOOP: Are you involved in Hipihi?

[23:19] ANSHE: In RL, I have been talking to several platform providers, besides Linden Lab. We are not developing platforms at my design studio, but as soon as a platform provider supplies the option we can make it successful.

[23:33] SCOOP: As new nonprofits come into SL, they can turn to the Commons for a better idea about how to get things going quickly.

[23:33] ANSHE: Yes, I hope that there will be some network effect of nonprofits helping nonprofits and sharing resources.

[23:34] SCOOP: What makes SL a good forum for giving?

[23:38] ANSHE: I think it is a good collaboration tool. SL is a good place to visualize projects and to bring people together to discuss and collaborate on efforts. Time here is cheaper, in part because there is no overhead of traveling and complex scheduling. If I can log on for 30 minutes, meet people all over the world to discuss projects, and even examine some 3-D model, that is far better than spending days traveling. I see SL in the same league as telephones and email, only that SL adds more options for collaboration and communication.

[23:40] SCOOP: Collaboration is, in many ways, a donation of time.

[23:40] ANSHE: Yes, but in Second Life, the important aspect is that this can be optimized.

[23:44] SCOOP: SL offers an opportunity but there are limits, including some that we have experienced in this interview, such as long delays in the transmission of responses, and long rendering times. Does that frustrate you?

[23:47] ANSHE: No, because I know this is only the very early version of the metaverse. If you consider this and the fact I am connecting from Wuhan, this is working astonishingly well! :-)