Sheila Yoshikawa: So I've given you a brief glimpse of how educators and other professionals are using Second Life as a site for learning and teaching. Play and playfulness are part of teaching and learning in various ways, including playing out situations of rehearsal for meeting them in the physical world and making professional development a more enjoyable experience. In this video, the focus will be on disability work in Second Life, virtual worlds providing a hospitable environment for those with disabilities.

In Second Life, a lot of communication takes place through text chat, and that's helpful for those with hearing impairment. You also find people willing to transcribe speech into text chat at meetings, so helping the hearing impaired, but also anyone who likes reading as well as hearing. The idea of universal design proposes that design that helps those with disabilities really helps everyone.

Whilst not everything about Second Life is disability friendly. For example, it's not so good for those with visual impairment. Still, there are characteristics of virtual worlds which are disability friendly. I'm going to talk to Alice Kruger, Gentle Heron in Second Life, about the Virtual Ability Project.

Alice Kruger: Gentle Heron is the avatar of the person who is both the founder of the Virtual Ability community in Second Life. And I am also the president of Virtual Ability Inc. Virtual Ability Inc. is a non-profit - you may call it an NGO in your country - and our nonprofit supports the work that we do here in Second Life.
I'm a former teacher, a former education researcher, and when I became fully disabled with multiple sclerosis and could no longer work or have a social life in the physical world, I turned to the virtual world to see if that could fulfil my socialisation needs. And it has more than fulfilled them. It has been a wonderful place for me.

Virtual Ability is a cross disability peer support community. And what that means, the cross disability piece means that we have people in our community who are completely deaf, fully blind, totally paralysed, people who are very low on the IQ range. We have people with all kinds of needs. And we work together as a community to support each other.

We have about 900 - well, we have over 900 members now. We've been in Second Life for over seven years and we are very strong and very active. People who are deaf need text information, and so when we have presenters who are speaking, we have a person who transcribes what they're speaking into text as they're speaking. Not word for word. You can't type really as fast as a person can speak, but they get the gist of it, kind of like sign language interpreters get the gist of what people are saying, so that our deaf people can know what's going on around them in real time.

Now, what's really cool about that is that we've had several people tell us that that was really good adaptation for them. They have an attention deficit disorder and so they need to be constantly reminded with that text input to pay attention, or they have a crying baby in the next room that they need to get up and go take care of before they come back and so they can scroll back up and see what went on.

Or perhaps their first language isn't English and they prefer text. That it's--maybe text is easier for them to translate it to the language they understand. So most of the adaptations that we provide for people with a particular disability, turns out they're pretty useful for other people as well.
One of the most enjoyable things about virtual worlds is that, many of us whose ability to play is limited because of our disability, we can still do a lot of play and have a lot of fun in the virtual setting. So for instance, before my MS became really bad I used to like to hike around in the mountains here. And I can't do that anymore. I can't even drive. I can't go to the mountains. But here in Second Life I can hike around in mountains all I want.

Many of the things that we experience too intensely in real life, you can experience a little less intensely here if you choose. And one of the things that I've noticed is that people on the autism spectrum are definitely overrepresented here in a virtual world. My hypothesis is that the virtual world removes some of the excessive stimulation that makes communication in the physical world difficult for people on the spectrum.

So they can communicate in text, which means they can type out and then look at what they're saying before they press Enter and actually say it to the people around them, they don't have to be distracted by hand gestures or facial expressions which our avatars don't do very well. But that's a benefit to people on the spectrum. So sometimes the differences between the physical world and the virtual world are positive benefits for certain people.

I think it's important for people to realise that this is a very positive environment for many people. Sometimes they meet me in the physical world and they say, I had no idea you were in a wheelchair. Well, the point is, the wheelchair doesn't really matter. It's not - the wheelchair isn't me, it's just a tool that I use. But when you meet me first and see me in the wheelchair, that's what you relate to. So it's helpful to not have to deal with that.

For people with disabilities who tend to be socially isolated, this is a place where they can learn social skills if that's what they need, or practise the social skills that they've learned, or just be sociable. They may not be able to do that
if they're isolated because of their disability. So this is just a marvellous environment for us.

**Sheila:** I've been talking about work with education and work by and for those with disabilities. The people I've talked to have seen play and playfulness as a positive aspect of using virtual worlds. They haven't seen it as a barrier to doing and learning about serious things. In the activity after this, we'll be asking you what kind of play you think this is and whether you think it's play at all. I look forward to seeing the discussion.