

Dream

The magazine of possibilities

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Keeping kids connected

Living with a transplant, the virtual way

For patients undergoing organ transplantation, the operation is only the beginning. It's followed by a lifetime of medications to prevent organ rejection, hospital visits and, for some, dietary restrictions and extreme efforts to avoid exposure to germs. And for teenaged patients, the process can be especially difficult. "I've been teased at school about being short," says Jimmy Yee, 13, who had a heart transplant as a baby. "These kids don't know what I went through."

But in the virtual world known as Zora, an online city built entirely by post-transplant patients, adolescents aged 11 to 16 can forget that they're "transplant kids" and vent their feelings. Logging on from home, the kids create their own houses and items to fill them, and choose a cartoon character or "avatar" to represent them as they roam their three-dimensional world.

For many, Zora is just a way to have fun. But its developer, child development specialist Marina Bers, PhD, believes that people learn and develop socially by actively building things together.

Plus it provides them with a new way to connect with other teens in the same situation. "The technology is intriguing to the kids," says [Elizabeth Blume, MD](#), medical director of [Children's Cardiac Transplant Program](#). "We've tried to do support groups, but most kids don't want to sit around and talk to other kids who've had a heart transplant. They see themselves as normal kids."

When Zora began, it was just an open field. Today, it's a busy landscape of houses, notice boards and public places like a restaurant, a zoo and a building offering technical help. Most of the buildings are built by patients, but others were provided by staff. Noticing that some of the girls were engaged in a chat about their transplants, for example, staff suggested they create a place for their stories, and the Transplant House was born. Ultimately, it's hoped that patients from hospitals all over Boston and perhaps the nation will move in.

It's clear, though, that Zora users don't want an agenda imposed on them, says Children's psychiatrist [Joseph Gonzalez-Heydrich, MD](#). Several years ago, he helped pilot Zora with dialysis patients. Nurses set up a virtual restaurant, hoping to educate their patients about safe dietary choices. Instead, the kids filled the menu with forbidden foods they wanted no dialysis-related information intruding in their city.

So this time, while a health museum and a pharmacy are planned, their function will be left to Zora's users. And if the theory is correct, the kids will learn more about life after transplantation on their own while making friends and having fun with cutting-edge technology.

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