

## **A Second Life for Higher Ed**

### **A virtual world offers new opportunities for teaching**

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When Prof. Jeremy Kemp entered the classroom to find a student transformed into a giant bowl of Jell-O, he didn't bat an eye. "I remember one class when a student arrived in a gorgeous monarch butterfly costume complete with gently fluttering wings and bulging eyes," says Kemp, assistant director of the virtual campus of San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science.

Kemp was teaching a course using Second Life, an online 3-D virtual world created by San Francisco-based Linden Lab. San Jose State is one of an increasing number of schools exploring the possibilities of Second Life, in which users assume the identities of cartoonish characters they design called avatars and roam around computer-simulated landscapes. Sound strange? It won't for long.

Dozens of colleges around the globe have joined, buying digitally designed "islands" in cyberspace—to the tune of \$1,000 per region—where professors in avatar form conduct classes and hold office hours. In the fall of 2006, Harvard Law School, working in conjunction with Harvard Extension School, offered a course that any Second Life user could attend. A year later, Princeton opened an island of its own, complete with a simulated lecture hall, performance venue, and virtual art museum. In Louisiana, there's a statewide initiative to fund a study about the value of 3-D websites to higher education. That study will include the purchase and construction of five islands in Second Life.

"If there were another disaster like Katrina, this would be a first resort," says Merrill Johnson, an associate dean and professor of geography at the University of New Orleans. "The virtual campus would still be intact. Even though students might be in Maine, California, and Texas, they could still gather in the virtual conference room and have some

real-time communication."

**Work or play?** Educators say Second Life is an effective teaching tool in part because it provides a social laboratory where role-playing, simulations, exploration, and experimentation can be tried out in a relatively risk-free environment. But perhaps the most touted benefit of Second Life is the opportunity it gives students to interact with people around the world—there are users registered from more than 100 countries. It also allows students to visit places that no longer exist, like a townscape reconstructed to look like Elizabethan England in the late 16th century.

It sounds fun, right? Indeed, one worry is that student activity on Second Life may be more playful than pedagogical. Students have to learn to teleport, manage and outfit their avatars, and handle basic communication before they can even begin to think about the course homework. And the software isn't all that intuitive. "Students need to have adequate time to become minimally skilled," says Robert Vernon, who teaches in Second Life at Indiana University School of Social Work in Indianapolis. Policing behavior in the virtual realm has also been difficult. In one disturbing incident, Ohio University had to temporarily close its island when a virtual gunman began shooting other visitors. And this summer, the Woodbury University island was permanently deleted after Woodbury student avatars engaged in disruptive and hostile behavior.

The most common complaint, however, is that communication between avatars is inadequate. Although it is possible to click on emoticons to, for instance, make an avatar smile, the actual effect can look unnatural and even unnerving. "I've tried to conduct classes in Second Life, and it is clearly inferior to a classroom situation," says Peter Ludlow, a professor at the University of Toronto. In a classroom, teachers can read the body language of students and determine if they are attentive, bored, tired, distracted, or agitated, but in Second Life they get none of that feedback.

"The eye gaze of an avatar means nothing," says Ludlow. "The student could be in the next room making a sandwich."

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