



## ***Using Second Life as a platform for education***

# **Professor Avatar**

**By Andrea L. Foster**

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**D**ESPITE its image as an all-American city, downtown Peoria, IL, home of Bradley University, is also a place of strip clubs and violent crime. For undergraduates, it's a risky environment in which to conduct field research. Edward Lamoureux, an associate professor in Bradley's multimedia program, saw a better place in the virtual world Second Life.

This fall he is teaching his second ethnography class online in a computer-created environment featuring buildings, lakes, and avatars—digital characters who fly from place to place, chat, and form communities. Students have analyzed, among other topics, online hackers (known as "griefers" in Second Life) and avatar fans of musi-

cians who perform in Second Life.

Flying avatars, virtual fan clubs, and computer-drawn lakes seem, at first glance, to be of little educational value. But ever since Linden Lab, a San Francisco-based company, unveiled Second Life in 2003, professors and college students have flocked to it.

People visit Second Life free by logging in to its Web site and creating an avatar, but educators usually spend about \$1,000 to own virtual "land." Many shell out hundreds of dollars more buying virtual goods like furniture and clothing.

Professors use Second Life to hold distance-education classes, saying that communication among students actually gets livelier when

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they assume digital personae. Anthropologists and sociologists see the virtual world as a laboratory for studying human behavior. University architects use it as a canvas on which to explore design. Business professors see it as a testing ground for budding entrepreneurs.

More than 150 colleges in the United States and 13 other countries have a presence in Second Life. Although some faculty and staff members are skeptical of the digital world's value, the number of virtual campuses keeps growing.

Here are six educators' Second Life stories.

### The Ethnographer

The trickiest part of starting his ethnography class in Second Life, says Lamoureux, was getting the nod from Bradley's human-subjects-protection committee. Initially, the committee asked students to submit a lengthy proposal for each research project since the real people behind the avatars observed by the students could be identified. After prodding from Lamoureux, though, the committee allowed him to file just one application for the class.

The New Media Consortium, a nonprofit higher-education technology group, has provided the technical support and space in Second Life for Bradley, as it does for many colleges. Lamoureux's students, represented by their avatars, regularly meet in a boardroom in the sky.

Bradley is now in the process of building its own digital campus, or "island," as many installations are called in Second Life. And Bradley's library director is on the board of a group working to build a library in Second Life.

Lamoureux is so enthusiastic about Second Life that every Saturday night for an hour he strums the guitar and sings folk and rock songs before an online audience as the avatar Professor Beliveau.

### The Writing Coach

Perhaps one of the most recognizable avatars in Second Life is Intellagirl: Sarah Robbins, a 32-year-old doctoral student in rhetoric and composition at Ball State University.

Since fall 2006, she has led a freshman English-composition class on the university's Second Life campus, Middletown Island. Drawing from her teaching experience, she encourages other educators to use the virtual world for instruction, arguing that the platform makes many students more enthusiastic about learning. Just as Netscape brought the Internet to a wide audience, so Second Life introduces virtual worlds to people who might otherwise never have explored them.

Professors preparing to teach in Second Life for the first time should be ready to cede some control over their courses to students, allowing them to, for example, build and

design digital classroom spaces, Robbins suggests.

"If we let the students create the space, then they make the space that's best for them," she says. "And that gives us insight into how they learn and makes them more engaged and more responsible for their learning."

Her students' writings are based on their research and observations in Second Life. Composition topics have included how avatars form communities and online identities versus real-life identities.

Robbins designed the buildings and open spaces on Middletown Island herself. Convincing colleagues that she could actually teach a class there was more difficult. The key was to impress on them that she could achieve the goals of the university's core composition class in the virtual world.

She let other professors sit in on the class and offer feedback, and she invited students to make suggestions to improve the class as it progressed.

"There was an agreement that we would be constantly aware of how it was going, and that we would make adjustments accordingly," she says.

To those in academe who tell her that Second Life only entertains, she responds: "This method works well for me. It might not work for you, and it won't work for every student. But neither does a learn-

ing-management system or a lecture class."

### The Architect

Summer at Vassar College is a lazy season. But since June, when Steve Taylor unveiled his re-creation of the Sistine Chapel on Second Life's Vassar Island, the online buzz it generated has been growing.

Taylor, Vassar's director of academic computing services, digitally duplicated the ornate interior of the famed cathedral, from the barrel-vaulted ceiling, adorned with Michelangelo's frescoes, to the Renaissance pilasters. He used mostly electronic images already available on the Internet.

Unlike visitors to the real chapel, in Vatican City, those to the digital version can fly to the ceiling to inspect the depiction of stories from the Book of Genesis. They can view tapestries that Pope Leo X commissioned Raphael to design for the walls in the 16th century.

Taylor, who has never visited the actual 15th-century chapel, put it online to inspire other professors to build educationally in Second Life. Perhaps an environmental-studies scholar will consider creating an outdoor environment to teach ecology, or a scholar of Gothic architecture will recreate a notable Gothic building, he says.

Vassar keeps track of visitors to the site because they must agree to conduct themselves in a respectful

manner before proceeding into the building. To date, about 1,000 avatars have agreed and gone inside.

### The Literature Scholar

If the students of Beth Ritter-Guth are racked by nightmares about burning in hell, they can be excused. They immersed themselves in Dante's *Inferno* by exploring a three-dimensional model of the abyss.

Ritter-Guth, an English instructor at Lehigh Carbon Community College and an adjunct at DeSales University, is the creator of Literature Alive, a Second Life project that engages visitors in reading by guiding their avatars on tours of pixilated versions of famous literary spots.

She created the locations with help from a British builder in Second Life and Laura Nicosia, an assistant professor of English at Montclair State University. Various colleges play host to different literary scenes on their virtual campuses.

The *Inferno*, from *The Divine Comedy*, is stored on a computer and is presently in search of a permanent home. But when the New Media Consortium hosted it for 10 days on its digital island, hell was hugely popular.

Ritter-Guth depicted the *Inferno* as a half-fiery, half-frozen pit lined with steps. In a contemporary-fiction class, she had students place photographs of well-known figures

on the *Inferno* steps based on what level of hell they thought the figures represented. President Bush, Saddam Hussein, and Donald Trump were among those posted.

"Dante's version of the *Inferno* is very politically drawn," she explains, "and the students did the same thing, where they picked political figures for the different layers."

The Literature Alive project relies on donations and volunteers, and Ritter-Guth pays for many of the digital objects herself.

### The Campus Planner

Meander around the Second Life island of Montclair State University, created largely by A. J. Kelton, and experience how he imagines the ideal college campus. Kelton is director of technology services at Montclair State's College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Faculty members can sunbathe on chaises longues by a lake and listen to birds chirping. Or they can head to an adjacent covered deck, sit on cushions, and have an intimate conversation around a fire.

The side of a mountain is embedded with stones that describe the syllabus of a freshman course about getting acclimated to university life that Kelton teaches. Nearby spheres describe the deadlines for each week of the course.

Visitors can also immerse themselves in literature at some Literature Alive spots. ►

They can walk around the island of Willow Springs, ancestral home of the protagonist in Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, or take a stroll along the forest trail where the title character confronts evil in "Young Goodman Brown," a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Kelton encouraged the professors who designed the environments to include them in Montclair's island.

"The thing about these learning areas is that the knowledge is already there," he says. "In a traditional classroom, it's an empty classroom with students in it until the teacher walks in."

Kelton, who runs a blog about educational sites in Second Life, also uses the virtual world to teach a course in beginning writing. He says several faculty members plan to use the island in their classes.

### The Technologist

Campuses created by many colleges in Second Life mirror their real campuses. But Phillip Long, associate director of the Office of Educational Innovation and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, envisions the virtual campus as a student-led laboratory.

Only about one-quarter of M.I.T.'S island resembles the university's actual campus. Therest is dedicated to student projects. Long designed the space, and the New Media Consortium did the construction.

M.I.T. "wants to do this in strong collaboration with students," he says. "And we don't want to get ahead of them or project whatever idealized notions we might have onto what we think the cultural practices and interaction styles of our students might be."

In one part of the island, speakers can mount a dais and address a crowd through a megaphone. When a speaker talks, listeners move to the right or left of a line that divides the platform, depending on whether they agree or disagree.

The placement of the line represents the average viewpoint of all of the avatars within earshot. Drew Harry, an M.I.T graduate student who studies how virtual environments can help consensus building, established the platform.

The island also includes dormitories. Incoming students might get a better sense of what dormitory is best for them—be it the one for jocks, indie-rock fans, or computer geeks—by touring three-dimensional models of the dormitories' interiors, Long says. M.I.T. sponsored a contest for students to design the exteriors.

In the part of the island that resembles the real campus, a theater opens onto a grassy quad, and a movie screen stands on the roof of a nearby building; both can be retracted to appear invisible. They are for classes and other gatherings. In virtual worlds, "outside spaces are much more comfortable

than interiors," says Long, because viewing a classroom on a computer screen can feel claustrophobic.

### **Second Life: Second Thoughts and Doubts**

Not every educator who has explored Second Life has come away impressed. Many complain that the virtual world is beset by technical problems, is a waste of time, or is largely a playground for sexual experimentation.

Mark Herring, dean of library services at Winthrop University, in South Carolina, asked younger, tech-savvy librarians to immerse themselves in Second Life for three months to see if they could discover new ways to serve the library's clientele. They came up empty-handed, says Herring, who wrote an article for *Library Journal* describing his disillusionment with the virtual world.

The academic-library sites he has seen in Second Life generally accomplish nothing more than regular Web sites do, he says, adding that the three-dimensional environment is much harder to use. Some educators leave the virtual world frustrated that they cannot easily move around, communicate, or find regions populated with avatars. Second Life has several million members, but only about 430,000 of them log into the site over a given week. So at any one time, many regions are deserted.

"We would all be better served

by working in the world we live in," says Herring.

Even those who believe Second Life has great educational potential worry that it is used in the wrong way. Nicholas Adams, an art historian at Vassar College, says the recreation of the Sistine Chapel on Vassar's virtual campus looks cartoonish because the frescoes' colors and textures are off.

Some professors are wary of promoting Second Life to their students, noting that sexually oriented regions, such as a nude beach and "free sex-orgy room," are among the most popular places in Second Life.

"Second Life is primarily a platform for adults to explore their sexual identity," wrote Sylvia Martinez in a July posting to the blog of Generation YES, an organization that helps schools use new technology. Martinez is the group's president. "Ignoring the overtly sexual nature of Second Life," she wrote, "is like going to a strip club and then wondering why there are naked people there."

She and other critics also complain that the virtual world's software frequently crashes, and that it requires a lot of bandwidth. Indeed, technical problems are so frequent that Linden Lab maintains a blog with almost daily warnings about snafus. The posts often close with "Thank you for your patience." For many users, patience is wearing thin. *ed*