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# Pepperdine In a Treehouse

By CHRISTINE LAGORIO

Isaac Greenbaum, a continuing education student at New York University, remembers the day last semester when his media studies class was settling into a discussion of its next group project. Shortly after class began, a brawny, bare-chested figure bounded in wielding a crossbow.

"This guy is shooting arrows, and if he hits you -- of course, you can't die -- you get teleported to a different land. And he hit me! I got sent to, like, the Himalayas!"

Sabotage can happen when your class is held in cyberspace, where a marauding avatar may just barge in and audit. Avatars are the virtual personas that users design and embellish (with anything from wings to, well, crossbows) to navigate the digital three-dimensional world called Second Life. Much of Second Life, now occupied by some two million users, mimics real life (R.L., in the vernacular): sun, sky, trees, waterways and anything users think to build. Were avatars the size of their human creators, the Second Life "grid" -- a mainland and surrounding islands that users can buy with real money -- would be the equivalent of more than 100 square miles. (Enter at www.secondlife.com.)

Scores of colleges and universities have set up campuses on islands, where classes meet and students interact in real time. They can hold chat discussions and create multimedia presentations from virtual building blocks called prims. The laws of physics don't necessarily apply.

At Middletown Island (named for Ball State's middle-American campus town, Muncie, Ind.), students hold after-class chats about their assignments while their avatars practice dance moves at the island tiki bar. They log in from their R.L. dorm rooms to decorate their avatars' virtual dorm rooms.

Instructors say the Second Life class experience is particularly enhanced for distance learners. In Second Life, classmates and instructor don't just communicate in chat rooms; they can actually see one another -- or, at least, digital alter egos -- on screen.

Bill Moseley, whose distance-learning course for Pepperdine University meets roughly every two weeks in Second Life, found an unexpected benefit: within the program's lifelike graphic environment, his students had "a community online and the feeling of being together." Nearly any time he logs on, he finds one or two tinkering with their project or exploring another area of the grid. For fun one day after class, everyone took a student's new virtual dune buggy for a spin around Malibu Island (Pepperdine is in California, after all).

Rebecca Nesson, a Ph.D. candidate in computer science, brought her class at Harvard Extension School to Second Life last semester. "Normally, no matter how good a distance-learning class is, an inherent distance does still exist between you and your students," she says. "Second Life has really bridged that gap. There is just more unofficial time that we spend together outside of the typical class session."

Linden Lab, the company that created and runs Second Life, has sold more than 100 islands for educational purposes, at about $1,000 each plus $150 monthly maintenance. Owners of islands have more sophisticated controls over the virtual experience, including the ability to make their land public or private (invisible to others).

Since N.Y.U.'s media studies class was one of the school's first forays into Second Life, the class, which is offered within the Paul McGhee Division for adult education, took up residence on an island called simply Campus: Second Life. Linden donates a free acre for the duration of a class so a college can experiment before investing in an island.

SECOND LIFE'S education community is growing: subscribers to its education listserve number more than 1,000; at least three islands run by library groups are open to the public; and universities are collaborating by lending space on their own islands or sharing ideas. Graduate students doing research or teaching in Second Life have formed a mobile colony that holds discussions with experts in subjects like online ethics or aesthetics. Seton Hall, in South Orange, N.J., presented its Second Life teaching methods at a recent conference held on New Media Consortium's island, and the MacArthur Foundation held a panel discussion called "The Future of Digital Education" on Harvard's island.

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