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A Second Life for Middle School Science

by Linda Briggs

Second Life, the virtual online world that is catching the attention of colleges and universities for its educational possibilities, hasn't been an option for middle school use because of its age limit. Although most 12-year-old students would probably find the site's graphical elements and endless social possibilities intriguing, Second Life's policy bars anyone younger than 13 from accessing any aspect of the site.

Now, using part of a $1.7 million grant from the National Science Foundation, graduate students from Ohio University's Russ College of Engineering and Technology have changed that. Working with Linden Lab, the company that owns Second Life, the grad students have developed a special protected island within the virtual world where only select middle school students are allowed.

With that security bar in place, the graduate students are now working with local area middle school science teachers to design interactive games that will help children grasp difficult science concepts. So far, they've developed four games, each with specific learning elements.

Games teaching science According to Assistant Professor of Computer Science Chang Liu, in addition to the prepared games, the virtual campus extends the reach of education. "Students can conduct simulated science experiments or engage in team-learning activities in our engineering buildings from anywhere, anytime."

Once on the special island, students can take full advantage of all of the features of Second Life's highly graphical virtual world. They can move about, "chat" with other students on the island, walk, run ,and even fly through highly developed landscapes, park-like settings, and even buildings. Participants can explore, build, collaborate, learn, and take part in activities as part of a virtual society, just as they might in the real world.

Second Life is just one of several technologies that the graduate students selected as part of the NSF project to help teach science to middle school students. While they found some college courses using Second Life, there were few K-12 uses, and no middle schools. That's because middle schools typically have special security requirements on their networks and in labs to keep students from wandering freely about the Internet.

Creating a safe environment Second Life already offers a special area for teens, allowing in only those ages 13 to 18. But since some middle school students can be under 13, that has barred middle school use.

The solution, Wang explained: The graduate students worked out an agreement with Linden Lab to develop a special secure private island, allowing select middle school students only as its visitors. "We wanted to ensure that the kids were in a very safe environment," he said.

As an additional layer of security, students don't set up their own Second Life accounts; Chang's project takes care of that. The special island is completely isolated and can be accessed only in school with a teacher's permission, not from home.

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