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Virtual-reality software creates parallel campus, enhances education

David DeWitt
Athens NEWS Campus Reporter
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Paul Shovlin is a graduate student teaching assistant with the Center for Writing Excellence at Ohio University. The other day he was flying above the College Gate on campus and insisting his students call him Hambone.

Shovlin's class wasn't acting much better. They were all flying around too, and those not flying were stumbling -- some lost, and some finding their way. Some were actually beginning to learn to walk pretty well.

Shovlin had set a simple task -- everybody meet up at College Gate. For these students, being in a junior composition course, in the upper echelon of higher education, this task should not have been so daunting.

Slowly they began to arrive. One had transformed himself into a squirrel and was running around with a bridge attached to his head. Another arrived dressed as a firefighter with a mohawk and a scuba tank on his back.

Even the buildings on campus seemed to be goofing off.

Cutler Hall was no longer the administrative center of OU, but rather a sort of

student center. Nobody would be able to find the Bursar's Office inside Chubb Hall because it was now full of classrooms. Memorial Auditorium on College Green had been miraculously replaced by Walter Hall.

Shovlin wasn't fazed by any of this.

"I feel there's an important space for play," he said, "even in a serious classroom."

The truth is Shovlin's students weren't really misbehaving at all. All sat attentively transfixed to the monitors in front of them in a Stocker Center computer lab. Also, all had arrived on foot. That is, it can be reasonably assumed none had flown to class.

Shovlin had been using the virtual-reality online software phenomenon, Second Life, as a part of his writing and rhetoric course.

Second Life is a virtual world, created by Linden Lab in San Francisco, built from the ground up by its own residents. Every resident in Second Life, called an avatar, is the creation of a first-life counterpart, who registers and designs his or her character.

Second Life is full of all the places, pleasures and even peccadilloes of its real-life counterparts. The avatars can transport to different virtual islands to participate in any number of activities.

The virtual world features corporate islands used to promote products, community islands used to promote various virtual community environments, and even virtual red-light districts used to promote... well, you get the picture.

Jay-Z has even held a virtual concert.

The Second Life community has been growing by leaps and bounds. At the beginning of December, Second Life had 1.3 million residents. As of Jan. 24, the population had increased to 2.9 million.

Shovlin, with a vast growing community of educators, administrators and faculty at OU, is interested in using Second Life as a state-of-the-art tool for online education.

Chang Liu, assistant professor in the university's School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, was first to bring the idea of involving OU with Second Life to the Center for Academic Technologies and OU Outreach.

The director of the center, Marjorie Dewert, said the center provided support and funding for Liu to set up a Second Life Learning Community at OU.

"Part of our mission and job is to support new work in the spirit of innovation and exploration," she said. "We can all get behind OU taking a lead in this area."

And that's exactly what the university is doing.

Bill Sams, executive in residence for university outreach, said OU has joined a few other elite schools as a part of the New Media Consortium division of Second

Life.

"We are literally virtually connected to the same campus as MIT, Cornell and Princeton," he said.

This group of connected Second Life islands is dedicated to using the new technology for developing education.

Sams said he sees OU as being on the cutting edge of a fundamental change in the educational paradigm. "Second Life offers an entirely new learning-delivery vehicle," he said

He pointed out that Second Life requires no book costs and has availability at all hours of the day and night.

Sams said that by using the virtual-education environment, the university will be preparing students for industries yet to be invented.

"It's teaching people more effectively with less cost," he said. "It's using programs to take over content teaching; that's going to be very important."

OU'S PART OF THE "CAMPUS" is even bigger than the other schools in the consortium on Second Life, taking up two islands instead of one. An island being constructed by the consortium has an exact replica of Stocker Center.

The second section of the virtual campus has been developed by Christopher Keesey of OU Without Boundaries and features those familiar but not quite identical aspects of the College Green mentioned earlier.

This island section also has a learning center where the university could hold virtual corporate and educational conferences.

Inside the center, an avatar would find a sample conference area and a sample classroom environment for John Stinson's course, "Managing in the Innovation Age." The virtual course kiosk features a real-world challenge, video spots of the virtual professor and the real one, as well as links to course readings and the class blog.

Keesey said in a press release, "We're not just moving the classroom into Second Life. We're innovating learning beyond what's already going on in the classroom with educational games, learning kiosks, student organizations and arts experiences."

The section of campus designed by Keesey features a Cutler Hall acting as student center that can virtually host real student organizations and activities. Users can also explore local arts and musicians in the online arts and music center.

The particular division at OU responsible for developing the school's involvement is called VITAL, or Virtual Immersive Technologies for Arts and Learning.

VITAL is a collaborative effort between the Russ College of Engineering and Technology, the College of Education and the College of Fine Arts. Its newsletter says the purpose of the lab is to create appealing immersive virtual environments

to enhance education.

VITAL features different projects for developing educational software and interactive applications. The projects have been funded through various grants.

Andrew Goodnite, assistant director of the VITAL lab, said a $1.67 million grant from the National Science Foundation has funded the STEAM project, otherwise known as Science and Technology Enrichment for Appalachian Middle-schoolers.

The first program in the nation to bring Second Life educational software to middle schools, the project is a joint venture of OU's School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and the College of Education. Participating middle schools include Alexander, Athens, Federal Hocking, Miller, Belpre and Roseville.

Graduate fellowship students from the Russ College of Engineering have been working with schoolteachers and have developed interactive educational games on Second Life to use with middle-schoolers in the classroom.

One setting is a virtual-science lab complete with an emergency shower and eye-wash station. Here students can study such things as the effects of flies and maggots on rotting meat in various jars.

Another game called "Energy Golf" allows students to learn about the different forms energy takes when applied to conductors such as a battery, a hair-dryer, a plant or a flashlight.

VITAL is also working with Meigs and Athens high schools to develop a virtual environmental science fair. The result of an Ohio EPA grant of $48,000, the Water Waste Land project addresses local environmental issues by promoting awareness among high-schoolers.

The students develop computer-simulated environmental models, and the two schools have teams competing to see which can build the most scientifically correct and immersive virtual environment.

The Appalachian Tycoon game developed on Second Life allows the students to build features such as a power plant or a coal-mining facility to see the effects on a stream near the facility. The students can also put in a water treatment plant to relieve the resulting pollution.

SO AS SHOVLIN WATCHES HIS students run around Second Life in chaos, he doesn't worry because the educational benefits are clear, and, he notes, the more the students use the environment the more accustomed they get.

"It's chaotic at first," he said. "It takes time for users to get acclimated."

But his interest is really in the effects of the environment itself. He said he wanted his students to think critically about the appearance and impressions they were giving off, demonstrating to them that if his avatar looked like Darth Vader, they wouldn't take him seriously.

"Rhetoric is the art of persuasion," he said. "A certain appearance in virtual reality

can affect ethos and credibility."

Shovlin said that at the end of his course he wanted students to become critical agents, to take care of themselves in the virtual environment of Second Life and translate that to other environments.

"That's what I think literacy is," he said, "adapting and being successful in different environments in terms of our communication."

He added, "This kind of environment is what everything is moving toward."��

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