



Virtual Classrooms Rez Up

Sandy Hon is the barista for a Spanish-speaking coffee bar on the island.

Facility

Cover: Nick Greenup, Saul Epstein and Davy Jones, senior analysts, ETC, (left to right) with Jonathan Bacon, academic director, ETC, (sitting, chair) are developing JCCC's Second Life island.

If you're not having fun in your first life, maybe it's time to try Second Life – a 3-D world imagined and created by its residents. Here you can

experience life as anything or anybody you want to be. Second Life is a leveling experience. It blurs county, state and country boundaries.

If all this sounds too existential to wrap your mind around, better keep wrapping. More than 11 million people have already signed on as residents, and JCCC has bought a Second Life island. Twenty pioneers, JCCC faculty and staff, met with analysts in the Educational Technology Center in fall 2007 to acquaint themselves with the building blocks of a virtual JCCC, and class activity is slated for spring-fall 2008.

"In a Web-based class you have mostly text and 2-D images. In Second Life you can have animations, movies, sound, even running water, and it's all in real time," said Nick Greenup, senior analyst, ETC. "You can add a physics engine to make objects move. Your avatar can fly or teleport anywhere. You can visit a virtual Harlem, walk through a painting in the Louvre or climb the pyramids. In my opinion, there is no limit to what you can do in Second Life."

This is no pie-in-the-sky investment for the college. According to Greenup, there are more than 60 institutions with Second Life islands. JCCC already has almost one-fourth of its

classes online, and, according to a National Public Radio report, online is growing at many times the rate of higher education overall.

Analysts in the ETC are building a Second Life campus with the Hare and Bell and familiar brick sidewalks. But what's the fun of an exact replica when you can add a beach, Spanish-speaking coffee shop and a museum of modern art showcasing students' digital artwork? Parts of the island are public, parts private. JCCC's island has an 18+ age rating. And what's the fun of being plain old you when you can build an avatar – your persona in the virtual world?

ETC is building a library of basic classroom components so instructors can pick and choose things they want in their classrooms – from a traditional chalkboard for showing PowerPoints to an elaborate science lab complete with Bunsen burners and test tubes for performing chemistry experiments.

So how involved is this for faculty?

"It is up to them," said Davy Jones, ETC senior analyst. "They can make their Second Life classrooms as simple or involved as they want. Just like for Blackboard CE or regular Web classes, the ETC is here to help."

“How much an instructor knows about Second Life isn’t as important as how excited they are about it,” said Saul Epstein, ETC senior analyst. “If Second Life really takes off, ETC can do the heavy lifting so teachers don’t have to be burdened with it.”

“It’s fair to say that at this time, setting up a Second Life classroom is time intensive. Everything has to be created. Nick, Davy and Saul are working on basic building blocks, and there are a lot of educators already involved in Second Life who are sharing objects. But Second Life is not something you can casually enter into at this point,” said Jonathan Bacon, academic director, ETC. “Right now, Second Life is a pilot project at JCCC to see if there is a valid educational use for this technology.”

Jim Hillen, adjunct professor, Spanish, is looking at Second Life as a way for students to immerse themselves in Spanish through a virtual visit to a Spanish-speaking country. Hillen’s avatar, Limes Miles, can sit on a park bench in Barcelona conversing in Spanish.

“My motivation is to look at what Second Life can do for a foreign language,” Hillen said. “There are a lot of possibilities, and some caveats. I think JCCC’s island has to be protected. It has to have the same rules as the actual college – no smoking, no weapons and no alcohol.”

That point will be addressed by Dr. Michael Robertson, professor of classics and humanities, who will use his fall 2008 sabbatical to create guidelines and institutional policies for faculty and student users of JCCC’s island. He will also develop ways to incorporate Second Life into the Learning Management System (such as Blackboard) or as an alternative to it.

Dr. Paul Decelles, science professor, has planned his 2009 spring sabbatical to script and build science experiments in Second Life, setting up scientific inquiries with variable parameters.

“I am not a Second Life evangelist,” Decelles said. “The potential for teaching is there, but it needs to be investigated.”

Technically, Second Life requires a free membership and a free download of its software. Decelles says users also need a mid-level graphics card and sufficient computer memory to access the site.

ETC analysts, if not evangelists, are enthusiastic proponents. They point out your avatar can attend class from anywhere and argue there are some things better taught in Second Life than in the classroom. For instance? Things that are too dangerous or too expensive to reproduce in the



real world. Examples already developed in Second Life include how to repair an off-shore oil rig, replace tanks under a gas station, and negotiate diplomacy between two countries that share a river near a nuclear power plant.

Greenup believes people who are having fun learning in a virtual classroom retain information better and Second Life can be more engaging than Web-based classes. Jones agrees.

“People don’t just sit and listen in a Second Life classroom,” Jones said. “They participate. It’s an interactive site.”

At this point, Second Life is meant to supplement, not supplant, Web-based or face-to-face learning. Not all of the Second Life activity has to be scheduled real time. Just like in a traditional class, a Second Life class can be a mix of live lectures, student discussions and assignments completed at the students’ convenience.

“There are a lot of things about Second Life that can benefit students,” Greenup said. “A person can look however they want. A student who is in a wheelchair can move around, fly around and participate in a game of soccer, things they couldn’t do in the real world.”

“Second Life has the potential to encourage students and reinvigorate faculty who want to look at it as an additional learning management system,” Bacon said.

You can visit JCCC’s island at: <http://shurl.com/secondlife/JohnsonCountyCommCollege>.

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