COURTESY OF JONATHON RICHTER

Second Life CATE

A Bright, Wonderful Future

Is the campus community ready for the next step in e-learning? BY AARON RAGAN-FORE

In November 2006, the UO's Center for Applied Technology in Education (CATE) opened a new satellite campus with little fanfare. The building, contemporary in design, was quietly elegant, with sleek, modern architectural details. A waterfall cascaded down the face of the edifice from the second story, landing almost at the feet of visitors walking up the front path to the wooden double doors. Inside, the sound of moving water mingled with pleasant bird calls filtering in. A six-foot high globe rotated in a front room. The building featured a large classroom devoid of desks and chalkboard, a fitting space for an organization committed to the new and experimental in education. The clean lines looked like they required the work of a major donor.

But the most remarkable feature of CATE headquarters?

It wasn't real.

Second Life Education

The new CATE, recently redesigned, exists only in Second Life, a three-dimensional, multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), a sort of online video game. This new building and its potential applications in the classroom come from the brain of a man who daily walks the line between what education could be — if it were re-examined, torn apart and reassembled — and the realities of budgets and resources.

The real-life office of research associate Jonathon Richter, located in a 1970s-era building in a CATE suite decidedly more humble than its online counterpart, displays the functional markers of an intellectual engine that powers the shimmering virtual façade.

"I'm definitely a non-linear thinker," Richter says. He's an educational futurist. Richter thinks big, outside the box, and that vision is a boon to CATE, an externally supported unit of the College of Education. Richter's day-to-day job is to implement game plans that wrestle cutting-edge conceptual abstractions into workable realities for the classroom or computer terminal — or culture at large — and to keep it all within budget. Richter and his CATE colleagues are routinely expected to produce tangible results from technically challenging hypotheses, funded by grants secured by CATE.

It's a difficult job, but that tension between the imagined and the concrete is where Richter thrives. Now it appears that Second Life, which Richter describes as "the harbinger of good tidings, if we frame it correctly," offers a halfway point between the two: all the expansive ideas the bandwidth can hold made reality in a world as small as a computer screen and as big as the user's imagination.

Users create nearly all Second Life content through a complex process of terraforming, building, molding and tweaking the world they share, seeing the same thing whether their computers are located in Louisville, Lima or Lillis Hall. Second Life boasts more than six million users (or "residents" as San Francisco-based parent company Linden Lab calls them) who design personal characters called "avatars" to interact with fellow residents of this new universe. Second Life provides a place where they can form societies, buy and sell items and services and even create buildings and neighborhoods. Some things are different: Second Life avatars can fly and teleport. But they also engage in more earthbound pursuits — collecting art, driving cars and holding down the virtual jobs that fuel a virtual economy. Avatars hang out in pixelated bars