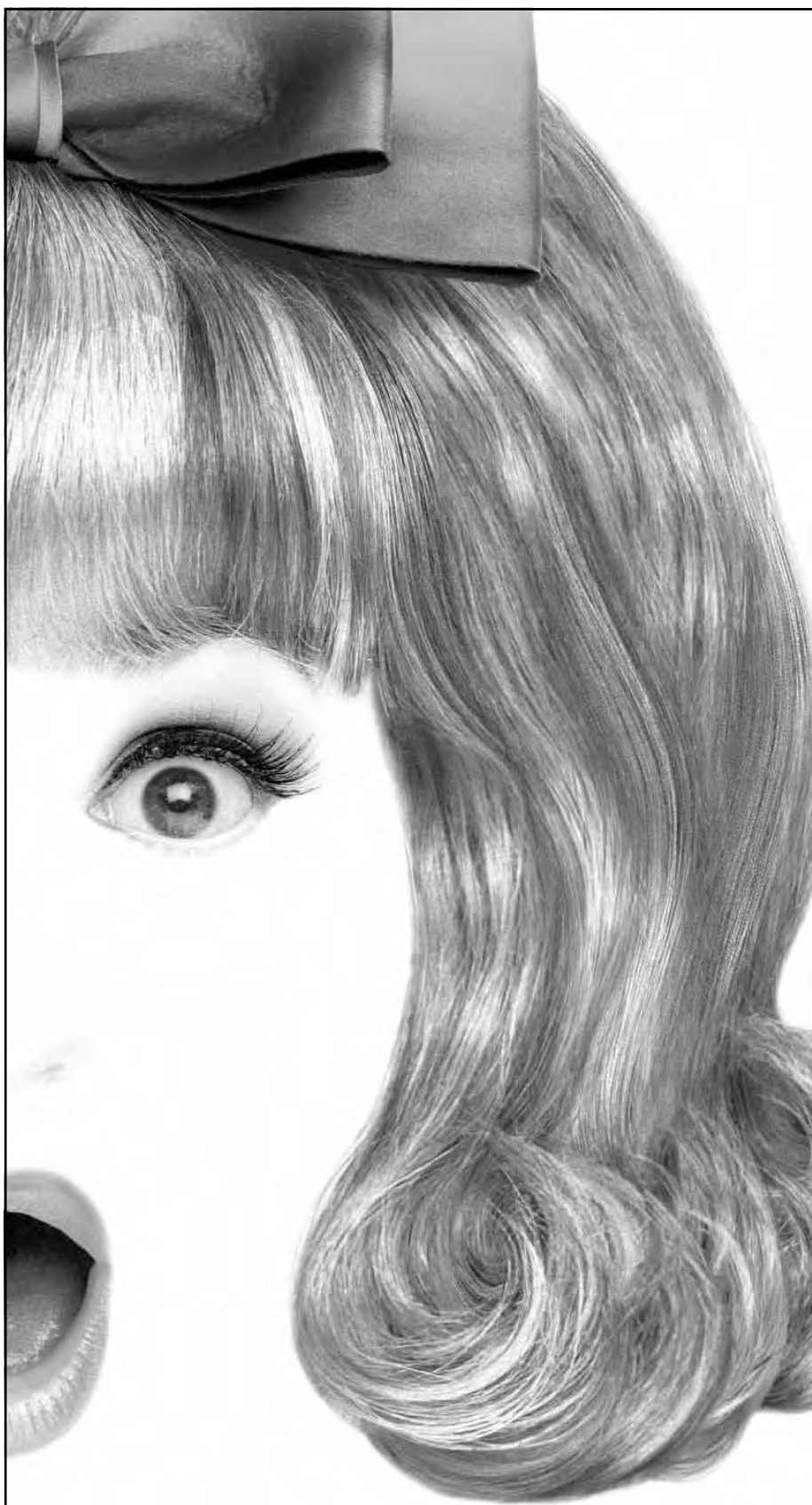




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support pop culture education!”

Leslie Rutberg, UO Academic Learning Services consultant and chief facilitator of the seminar, displays the flyer as an ironic memento but finds the sentiment is sometimes common among faculty.

The seminar goes reasonably well. It's held in a technology-equipped classroom of Knight Library, where a dozen or so faculty members gather for the presentation. It's the same classroom where Richter's class is held. The assembled faculty represent a cross-section of academic disciplines. Most hail from the schools of education and journalism, with the remainder split among the hard sciences, the social sciences and various units such as the campus radio station.

Rutberg and her colleague Robert Voelker-Morris (avatar name Kirby Usher), the seminar's facilitators, plow through a whirlwind tour of comic books, do-it-yourself zine culture and a cross-section of teen-skewing computer applications. It's pretty basic stuff, the sorts of applications young adults seem to pick up within a couple of minutes. The instructors touch only on the broad strokes of each medium, but for some of the professors, it still seems like too much.

While most of the faculty members are receptive to the idea of Second Life as a classroom tool, citing simulations of ancient Rome and other recreated historical environments, others scoff at the application's potential. A pinched-looking professor in the first row seems primarily interested in debunking the various media mentioned in the program. The facilitators seem determined to push past the faculty's initial gut resistance to the concepts and show them where the students of the 21st century live. Many of the curmudgeonly faculty are more interested in whether the students should be wasting time on this stuff at all, let alone dragging their professors down to their level.

Jonathon Richter is accustomed to this sort of resistance, but that doesn't make him any less frustrated by it. He recently joined in a debate that was being slowly and manneredly waged by fellow futurists on a list-serv. The content of Second Life, some said, is too frivolous, too sexualized and too inane. I have too many real friends I don't see often enough, it was argued; why should I network with strangers? Besides, how can a paradigm shift take place when the whole kit and caboodle is owned solely by Linden Lab, a corporation?

The interchange incensed Richter. In response he reminded the critics that Second Life's content is determined by its users. He rattled off a long list of counterexamples, educational environments including an International Spaceflight Museum with to-scale models of spacecraft, a NOAA tsunami simulation and a giant computer constructed by Dell. Besides, argued Richter, commenting on the actual content was beside the point, since futurists should be investing in the delivery method itself.

“We have, in my opinion, a moral obligation to get involved,” wrote Richter in a characteristically optimistic style, “and to the best of our ability, create the future that we wish to behold.” In addressing the balance between real and virtual lives, Richter stated, “I make a little time for a Second Life not because I have time in my busy First Life — but because it's all Just Life.”

Richter ended his post with “Peace to all, and a bright, wonderful future.”

Return to CATE

The night sky is clear. A full moon shines down on a couple of spare log cabins huddled in the darkness. An abandoned campfire crackles merrily away near a small stream, emptying into a small pool sheltering a family of ducks, the UO mascot. Twin pine trees sway in the gentle breeze, a banner suspended between them bearing the nautilus-shaped logo of the UO's Center for Advanced Technology in Education. This is the new Second Life CATE.

The old building was elegant and impressive, but used too much memory, says Richter. Besides, he adds over a plate of salad at Villard Street Pub, the rustic new environment “kind of feels more like Oregon.” The new look hasn't been up long, but has already inspired a more radical redesign: What if the already square parcel of Second Life land were terraformed to resemble a miniature Oregon, complete with a model-train-sized Portland and a puddle to represent Crater Lake?

Richter grins over the salad as the idea catches hold in his brain. Now he's thinking out loud, and the grin widens. Could an educational schema be built around the idea of students acting the parts of pioneers, trekking across Second Life to an Oregon-shaped simulation?

The electronic trees sway gently in the breeze, and the tiny fire crackles. The Second Life CATE, for the moment devoid of students, waits for its future. **EW**