

## Virtual world provides new opportunities for education

BY NANCY CARONIA

With today's technology, you can reconfigure who you are, including what you look like and how you behave, while keeping your old life intact. No reconstructive surgery, multiple personality disorder, or mind-altering drugs required.

This transformation is possible through the virtual reality world of Linden Labs' Second Life, an Internet 3-D virtual world that went live in 2003 and today boasts more than two million users throughout the globe. Second Life has both public and private space, allowing individuals to spend time interacting and networking on both social and business levels.

One prominent example is Gainesville's University of Florida, where the Digital Worlds Institute and the Department of Computer Science and Engineering have designed courses on Second Life that help students through difficult and often abstract concepts through experiential learning. Courses take place on the private virtual island of Aesthetica, which houses Gator Nation (a mirror institution of UF) designed by Paul Fishwick, Ph.D., director of UF's digital arts and sciences programs.

Even Fishwick has an alternate personality in Second Life. When he's teaching class on Gator Nation, he becomes his avatar Friedrich Courier, a furry raccoon that resembles Albert Einstein.

In addition to Fishwick's course, James Oliverio, director, DWI, is co-teaching an interdisciplinary research seminar where the goal is to bring together upper-level students in such diverse fields as biomedical engineering, business, film, and the arts so they can work on research projects in a collaborative environment. "DWI is a multi-disciplinary institute that includes seven colleges on the UF campus," he explained. "Individuals from multiple disciplines work together."



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The Digital Worlds Institute at the University of Florida has developed Gator Nation on the private virtual island of Aesthetica in the Second Life online world.

DWI has already created advanced media systems and developed digital culture on a global scale — most notably at SIGGRAPH in 2005 — and the institute holds patents for some of the technology that has been developed. "We're using Second Life as an enabling technology in the same way that overhead projectors were not the center of the classroom, but tools to help the educational process," noted Oliverio. "The class is not about Second Life, but it enables interaction between students who would never have gotten together in the same classroom to interact with each other. Additionally, the use of avatars further breaks down traditional barriers."

While Oliverio believes that environments such as Second Life are going to take five to 10 years to catch on, higher education institutions such as UF are leading the way to create more experiential media. "As humans we prefer experiential models, and the advantage of this experiential hands-on learning is that the mind and body is engaged like in many DL models," he added. "If there is such a thing as traditional DL models, we can embed it and augment it with something like Second Life." ★

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### MORE INFO

DIGITAL WORLDS  
INSTITUTE  
[digitalworlds.ufl.edu](http://digitalworlds.ufl.edu)

SECOND LIFE  
[secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com)