

The second life of us

Your lecturer disappears under the floor without warning. The guest speaker not only looks younger, he's changed gender, and a classmate just floated through the roof. DEBORAH FEWSTER discovers campus life, Second Life style.

Second Life, a 3-D virtual world that claims 7.6 million 'residents' worldwide, is a place where anything goes.

Populated by avatars (physical representations of users) with names like Dakini Enoch, Swifty Yoshikawa and Buffy Merlin, it's a virtual landscape that is fast becoming part of global pop culture.

While it's still too geeky to be as ubiquitous as MySpace, it does have its very own YouTube parody and a Google search for "Second Life" instantly brings up 64.2 million hits.

Wade through just a few of those 64.2 million entries and you'll get a sense of the passionate social, cultural and technological debate that Second Life evokes.

For some of its detractors, Second Life is just passé.

For others, it's weird, wacky, sleazy and tacky. Indeed, while Linden Lab, the San Francisco tech company behind the Second Life phenomenon, encourages its users to "become explorers" and harness the "depth and power and capabilities of SL to create anything", it's been speculated – though not confirmed – that 30 per cent of commercial activity in Second Life is sexual.

For the newbie, it can be a confusing space to navigate.

The first time that Associate Professor Dr Darren Tofts, Chair of Media and Communications at Swinburne University, arranged to meet his postgraduate students in Second Life, only one turned up.

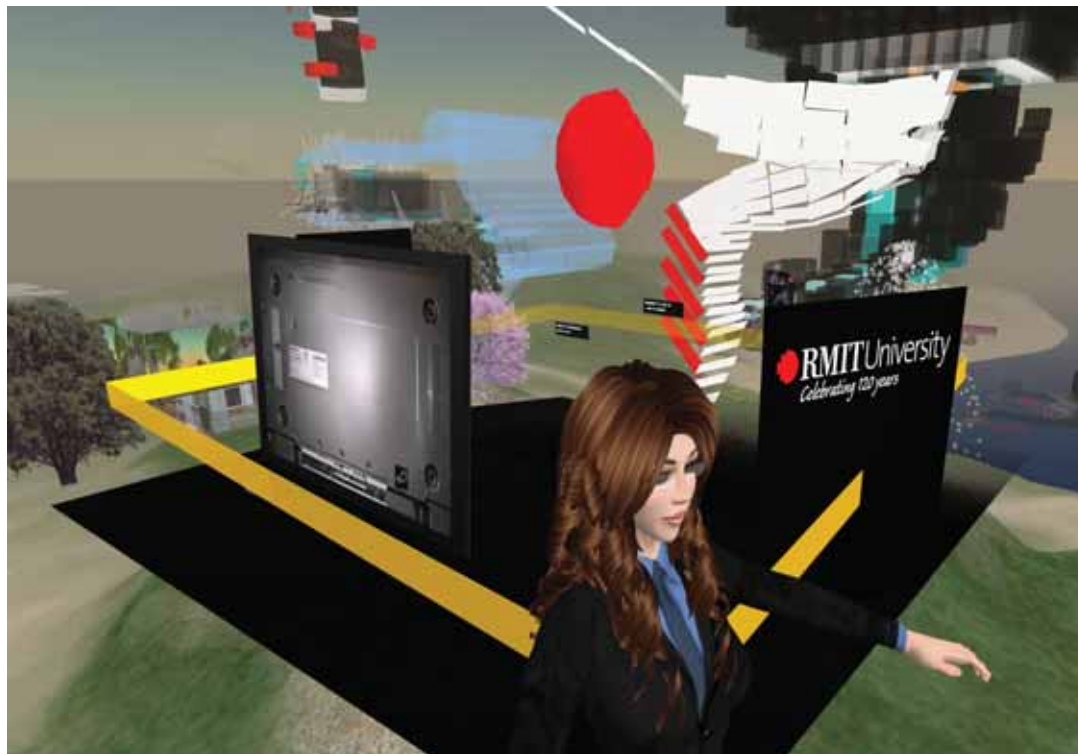
"The rest got stuck in Linden Lab's orientation and couldn't get out," he laughs.

"Then some got out but couldn't teleport to our meeting place."

It's a common Second Life scenario – so much so that although the number of registered users may figure in the millions, the rate of return visits is widely regarded as questionable.

For all the criticism and conjecture though, there's a small, but growing band of Australian tertiary institutions who hail Second Life as the next big thing in education.

For RMIT, the latest Victorian institution to jump on the Second Life bandwagon, it's a creative space for students to



RMIT architecture students spend a semester designing sculptures and buildings

“Everyone in education is getting into Second Life to be able to say we have an island and we ran a tute in there”

learn in and try out new skills.

This year it purchased a private island from Linden Lab for around \$1000 – half the going rate – becoming one of around 140 universities worldwide with a permanent presence on the Second Life grid.

Thirteen students from the School of Architecture and Design spent a semester designing sculptures, buildings and art as part of a course exploring virtual worlds.

All their lectures also took place online in Second Life.

The finished product includes a library of fashion, where visitors can do more than just read about the latest trends – their avatars can actually model outfits on a virtual catwalk. There's also

a library of dance moves.

Greg More, the Architecture and Design lecturer who led the project, says Second Life encouraged innovation in his classroom.

"Second Life presents a whole new set of issues for designers. People can fly, interact and experience a design from all angles.

"This [provides] students with the opportunity to explore digital design concepts that aren't realisable in the real world ... promoting creative thinking."

On the day of the launch, Professor Margaret Gardner, RMIT's vice-chancellor and president, went a step further, saying the Second Life island stood as an example of "how far RMIT

has come in the last 120 years and how we continue to pioneer new methods in teaching and learning".

Across town at Swinburne, Darren Tofts is a little more ambivalent.

While Swinburne hasn't purchased land in Second Life, a couple of its lecturers have taken their students 'in world'.

Like RMIT's Greg More, he says the Media Arts in Australia class he conducted in Second Life earlier this year was a great success and something he'll definitely do again.

The seminar, held in the main tower of ABC Island, featured Stelarc, a world-renowned cybernetic artist, and attracted 10 students and another 10 colleagues and academics.

The theme was avatars and disembodiment in Second Life.

"Rather than reading and talking about [concepts like] embodiment and disembodiment, the students actually experienced it," says Tofts.

Putting students directly into this scenario, he says, enabled them to confront issues – such as how to simulate spoken conversation in an environment that is predominantly textual – in a very direct way.

"The most erudite and compelling essay won't do that as effectively for them."

Tofts' colleague, Lisa Gye, ran a parallel project with her third year media and communications students, looking at the way news is researched and reported in the virtual world.

She had two embedded reporters in Tofts' "in world" seminar.

"Lisa used it as an experiential learning tool for her students and it was interesting to see an old paradigm like journalism in a new space," says Tofts.

Still, having used MUDs and MOOs – text-based virtual worlds that were precursors to Second Life – to conduct classes in the 1990s, Second Life doesn't offer anything particularly new for him.

In fact, "the general tenet of Second Life is quite puerile," says Tofts.

He cautions against the 'wow' factor.

"Everyone in education is getting into Second Life and part of the cache is simply to be able to say that 'oh, we have an island in Second Life and we ran a tute in there'.

"Big deal. If someone was to run an entire degree program in there, then I'd wake up and take an interest. Even the presentation of testamurs at graduation would have to take place in there."

His student Ali Atrash, who is undertaking a Masters in Applied Media, is more taken with the concept.

Ali knew "absolutely nothing" about Second Life prior to Toft's class. Now, he's keen for more.

Although his Second Life alter ego 'Ross Soderstorm' wasn't a radical departure from his first life persona, Ali found the virtual classroom liberating. □