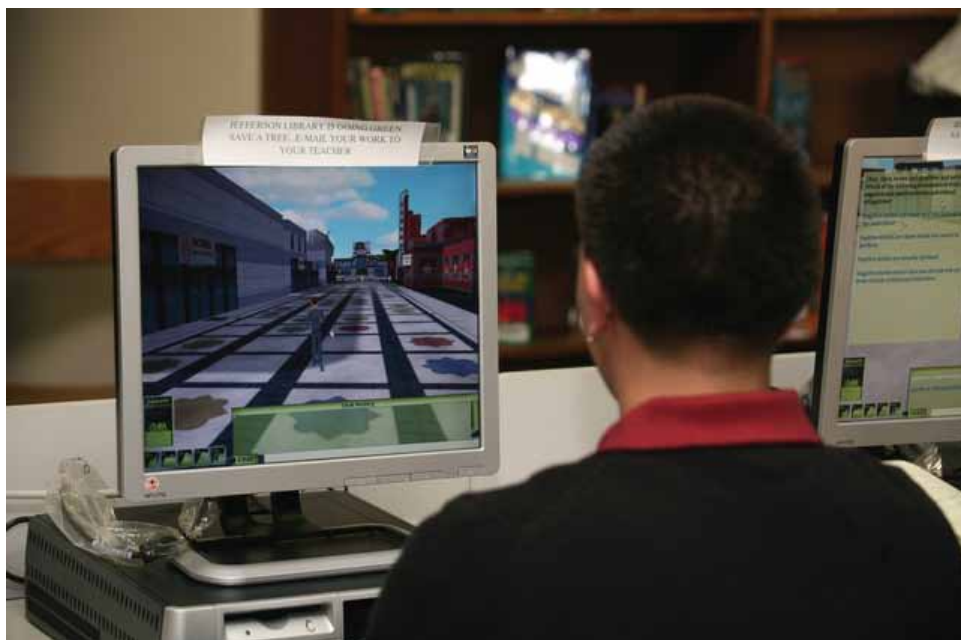


Avatars Go to School, Letting Students Get a Feel for the Work World



BY: WINNIE HU

Christian Lopez using an avatar program in Elizabeth, N.J. Teachers say the use of virtual worlds encourages problem-solving, allowing classroom knowledge to be used in real-life situations.

ELIZABETH, N.J. — Even as work crews and scientists mobilized over a huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, high school students in this city were hard at work cleaning up another spill — in the virtual world.

Students like Christian Lopez jumped into an elaborate video game, called *Spill*, in which they assumed on-screen identities known as avatars to run cleanup efforts for the mayor of New City. The game, devised to help students sharpen their business acumen and skills, was rolled out in more than 750 schools across the country as part of a business contest in March and April.

“I thought it was going to be easier,” said Mr. Lopez, 18, whose avatar “Chris” made rookie mistakes like showing up in jeans and sneakers for an important meeting with the mayor. His avatar also tried to cut corners in hiring a vendor, only to end up with a former convict. “It’s not bad,” he said, “but you have to make the right decisions.”

While not quite the eye-popping technology of the movie “*Avatar*,” schools are increasingly offering lessons in the virtual world as an alternative to textbooks and PowerPoint presentations.

Teachers and students say:

“The use of avatars and virtual worlds in classes... pulls in even reluctant learners, and encourages problem-solving and higher-order thinking as classroom knowledge is applied to real-life situations.”

In Suffern, N.Y., 2,500 middle and high school students have logged into a virtual world known as *Teen Second Life* for lessons in subjects including math and foreign languages. Eighth-grade health students fashion avatars to challenge media and social perceptions of beauty. A social studies class visited a recreated Ellis Island to go beyond historical facts and empathize with immigrants and immigration officers through role playing.

Peggy Sheehy, a media specialist for the Ramapo Central School District, of which Suffern is a part, said such virtual worlds allowed students to learn academically as well as socially.

“They’re able to explore other options, other genders, other races, other personality types,” she said. “A very outspoken, confident person may go into *Second Life* and be just that, or he could take a side seat, or a student who is very shy may not feel intimidated and becomes a much more vocal part of the community.”

The idea of video games in the classroom has concerned some parents, who say it can be a distraction, but many of the games are relatively new and have not been used widely enough to generate much criticism.

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Jim Wexler, Executive VP, 212.780.0140, x203, info@brandgames.com, www.brandgames.com

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In Elizabeth, the district approved the use of Spill in two required economics classes at Thomas Jefferson Arts Academy in March after a teacher discovered it online; the district is considering whether to expand its use next year.

"The game is available at no cost to schools through the accounting and consulting firm Deloitte and BrandGames, a company that specializes in the use of computer game technology in business communications."

It took almost a day to load the game software onto the school's computers, which are normally blocked from using gaming sites. "They were pretty excited," said Donald Stewart, a social studies teacher. "They were playing a video game; that was my selling point."

Then the fun started. Students designed their own avatars from a menu of options. One heavysset boy added a paunch to his avatar. Jalisa Wilson, 18, chose a male avatar because she felt a man would have a competitive advantage in business. She named him Bob. The Spill game throws tasks and challenges at students to give them a taste of real-life work experience. Students were graded on how well they measured up. There were meetings with the mayor, negotiations with vendors, even an on-screen glossary to look up unfamiliar business terms — like outsourcing and accounts receivable — and a notepad for jotting down assignments.

Students found out quickly that they could not just click mindlessly. If they forgot a vendor's name or a meeting location, the mayor's assistant gave them a



hard time. The mayor herself had an attitude, telling avatars in jeans and sneakers not to come back until they were properly attired.

"She just yelled at me," said Nina-C'mone Helms, 18, staring at her computer in disbelief last month. "She got smart with me because I chose the wrong person. My feelings are hurt, but it deals with real life because people really do talk to people like that."

Another student was caught off guard when a vendor demanded that he pay for a Ping-Pong table and soda machine for his workers. The student refused and negotiated the price down.

Donato Coppola, a teacher, said the only problem with learning in the virtual world was that it could be hard to go back to the real

world. When access to the game was blocked because of a technical glitch, he had to give an impromptu PowerPoint lecture on jobs and wages to the students.

"They were disappointed," he said. "I tried to make it enthusiastic, but economics is a hard sell. I didn't have enough animation in the PowerPoint for them, I guess."



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