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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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