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Today's News

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The Death of a Virtual Campus Illustrates How Real-World Problems Can Disrupt Online Islands

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Woodbury University has been obliterated. The real-world campus of 1,500 students still stands, in Burbank, Calif. But in the freewheeling virtual world Second Life, Woodbury has been deleted.

Linden Lab, the company that runs Second Life, simply blanked Woodbury out of existence sometime during the last week of June.

The company took the drastic step, officials said, after administrators for the university's area ignored warnings to stop avatars -- digital characters -- affiliated with its region from engaging in disruptive and hostile behavior.

Linden Lab, based in San Francisco, accused the avatars of launching attacks against other sites, often known as "islands" in Second Life, and behaving in a racist and harassing manner.

The disappearance may have colleges wondering whether they are in control of their virtual campuses. Second Life, which Linden Lab created in 2003, has become a popular stomping ground for faculty members and students.

Scholars have conducted research there in fields such as sociology, psychology, and economics. Professors and students, represented by their avatars, hold distance-education classes there.

Dozens of colleges from around the world have set up islands similar to Woodbury's, where visitors' avatars can become acquainted with an institution's programs, culture, and mission. Some institutions set up islands that replicate their campuses.

Linden Lab allows a person to create an avatar, at no charge, that can walk, run, and fly around the virtual world via computer keystrokes. About one million avatars visit the world every month. But the company charges people and institutions, including colleges, thousands of dollars to buy virtual land on which they erect buildings, clubs, houses, and other facilities.

Before letting people into Second Life, Linden Lab, like many virtual worlds, requires users to agree to a statement saying they will not act in a defamatory, vulgar, or harassing manner, nor damage digital property or computer systems while in the virtual world. Linden Lab also says it has the right -- for any reason -- to end people's accounts and remove their islands without prior notice and without compensating them for any loss of data.

An Unexplained End

Woodbury's doom came in the form of an e-mail message last month from Linden Lab, charging the university with violating Second Life's terms-of-service agreement. The message noted that the company had warned the university in April of "problems" associated with its island.

"Linden Lab has no option but to immediately close the Woodbury University region," the message said.

It was republished in the Second Life Herald, an independent Web site of news about the virtual world. Linden Lab could not be reached for comment.

Don St. Clair, a spokesman for Woodbury, said the university was investigating the incident. "The reason that Linden Lab has given us for taking the site down are specific in nature but not specific in incident," he said last week. "We intend to ask them for more specificity."

Woodbury employees established Woodbury University Island in March in order to familiarize communications students with novel ways of human interaction, said Mr. St. Clair. The university had plans to use the island to showcase student films and other student projects, as well as the activities of university departments, he said. The university paid Linden Lab $1,750 to use the virtual space.

It isn't clear whether Linden Lab simply took the Woodbury island offline, or actually destroyed the software behind it. Dori Littell-Herrick, an assistant professor and chairwoman of the animation department, said she believed it was the latter. If so, the university would need to build another island if it re-established a presence in Second Life.

Ms. Littell-Herrick suggested that Woodbury's island could have attracted unruly avatars because it was more open to outsiders than other college sites in Second Life. And while the island is gone, no Woodbury faculty or student avatars appear to have been barred.

"We need to see what went wrong because obviously getting shut down was not the result we were looking for," she said.

Edward Clift, an associate professor and chairman of Woodbury's communications department, who is responsible for the creation of Woodbury's island, railed against Linden Lab's action in an interview with the Second Life Herald.

"The destruction of the Woodbury 2.0 campus is, in my view, an egregious shot across the bow of academia," he said.

Virtual Vigilance

Woodbury is not the only college that has run into real-world problems after allowing visitors free access to a virtual site.

Troublemakers like to cause scenes at places where people are gathered, often displaying nude images or offensive language. Or they may stalk other users online.

The bad practices, referred to as "griefing," pose a challenge for any organization that creates a place in Second Life. How can officials stop such activities without having to constantly police their island?

In one disturbing incident, a user entered a virtual building on Ohio University's island with a virtual gun and began shooting other visitors.

Ohio University shut down its island until officials were able to get rid of the virtual gunman, says Muriel Ballou, director of Ohio University Without Boundaries, the institution's Second Life presence.

The university routinely works with Linden Lab, which runs Second Life, to root out such troublemakers, she says. Incidents like the virtual shooting helped spur Ohio to be on guard for any further offensive content.

At the same time, says Ms. Ballou, the university wants to keep the island open to all visitors to come and go as they please. Finding the right policies to achieve that balance is something that many users of Second Life will have to work through, she says. "You do have to think about it, because this is an open environment."

A Virtual Sistine Chapel

Steve Taylor, director of academic-computing services at Vassar College, recently unveiled a virtual replica of the Sistine Chapel on his college's island. Because the real Sistine Chapel is considered sacred by many people, he created a code of conduct that people must agree to before they can enter the virtual chapel. In general, the code simply asks avatars to behave with respect. Avatars do not have to be dressed in their Sunday best, he says, but they are asked to wear clothes.

The positive feedback that Vassar has received, Mr. Taylor says, got him wondering whether a similar agreement should be required for anyone who wishes to visit Vassar's island.

If the college goes through with such a requirement, officials will not be policing users to make sure they do not break any rules, he says. The plan would be to depend on other users to report violators.

"In principle, if someone was really identified as being a real problem," says Mr. Taylor, "I think there'd be a way to banish them."