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Iowa State University professor Brian Mennecke will hold classes in a virtual world this summer. Students will log on to Second Life to discuss e-commerce in sessions led by Mennecke's online identity, an avatar named Gut. Second Life is a 3-D, online world that is attracting professors who hold classes and conduct online experiments.

### Crash course in Second Life

## Professors add life to courses through Second Life

Virtual world used to hold class, create simulations

By LISA ROSSI  
REGISTER AMES BUREAU

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**STORY CHAT:** Add comment

Ames, Ia. - He's a stud with a ponytail, his name is Gut, and he's your professor.

At least that's who he is online. In real life, he's a bald white guy named Brian Mennecke whose wife won't let him grow a ponytail.

This summer, he will hold discussion sessions for Iowa State University students studying e-commerce led by his beefier online self (Gut),

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**WHAT IS IT:** Second Life is an online world run by Linden Lab, located in San Francisco.

**CREATED:** Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents. It opened to the public in 2003.

**MEMBERS:** It is inhabited by 7,050,211 people from around the globe.

**HOW IT WORKS:** Individuals jointly inhabit a 3-D landscape and build the world around them.

Source: Linden Lab

a cartoon character who can fly. The classes will be held in Second Life.

Second Life is a 3-D, online world that is increasingly attracting the attention of professors nationally and in Iowa who are using the virtual landscape to hold classes, create simulations of what they are studying, and hold online experiments. Professors at ISU, the University of Iowa, and the University of Northern Iowa are all exploring ways to incorporate the game into classes this summer and in the fall semester.

William Callahan, dean of the University of Northern Iowa College of Education, said Second Life is like a "quantum leap" from what professors in Iowa were starting to do a year and a half ago, uploading lectures online for students to download and listen to on their iPods.

In Second Life, users create an avatar, which is a cartoon version of themselves.

Last week, Mennecke



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logged onto Second Life and guided his avatar, Gut Noel, to NASA headquarters, the Hillary Clinton campaign, and into a shoe store - all places where he walks around and, in some cases, meets other online characters who were exploring the same places.

One scraggly-haired guy with tight jeans wandering around an Adidas store left abruptly after a brief conversation through instant messaging with Mennecke.

"He was rude," Mennecke said.

Controversy has followed the game's forays into education.

Michael Bugeja, director of ISU's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, calls Second Life "the foremost symbol of digital decadence that we confront in the so-called information age."

Bugeja, who has studied how electronic communication influences relationships, was particularly critical of



how the game will allow people to spend money in the virtual world to equip their virtual characters, homes and workplaces with accoutrements.

"Sometimes as a journalist, when I think of the issues we confront in the world, not only in Darfur, but also in Des Moines, concerning poverty and sacrifice and homelessness - I often wonder what people who spend so much money on Second Life and other digital distractions are doing to make things better."

Consuming is an important part of Second Life. Nearly 300,000 customers spent money in Second Life in May, according to its Web site.

Making money off Second Life was one of the focuses of Mennecke's electronic commerce strategy course held this spring.

Mennecke, an associate professor, had his class set up free Second Life accounts to assess potential entrepreneurial opportunities in the virtual world.

One group of students wrote a business plan for a consulting business that would help companies create a presence in Second life. Another team built a virtual solar car and race track.

Some class time will likely be spent in a room floating in the sky, Mennecke said.

Professors across the country are using the game to stimulate imagination and learning.

Psychiatry professor Peter Yellowlees of the University of California-Davis created an online simulation in Second Life of a psychotic episode experienced by a schizophrenic.

In that simulation, a man stands rigid in a mental health treatment center as he hears voices telling him to kill himself and that the "world is not quite right." The man, who wears flip-flops and socks, looks at a newspaper that blurs and seems to talk to him, saying, "I'll steal your mind."

There are no applications

for the game in public schools in Iowa as of yet, Callahan said.

But that doesn't mean there won't be soon.

Leigh Zeitz, a professor of instructional technology at the UNI College of Education, will teach a class this fall that will examine how to use interactive tools in the classroom. Students will log on and attend some class sessions in Second Life in that class too, he said.

Some students have majors training them to be teachers in K-12 schools.

Staff with Linden Lab in San Francisco, which operates Second Life, said the game is prohibited for users under 13. Teens also must play on a teen version of the game. There are no "immediate plans" for making the game for younger players, said Claudia L'Amoreaux, who is in the community development and education division of Linden Lab.

Educators who use the

game already report incidents of mischief associated with the game.

Mary Herring, the coordinator of the instructional technology division at UNI, said she recently logged on to Second Life and attended a virtual conference on best practices in education in Second Life.

There she mingled with avatars interested in using the game in class. Despite the formal setting, an avatar was able to crash the conference and disrupt it with obscene acts.

She said the mischievous elements of Second Life are no different than those on the Web or in the real world.

"I can't require my students not to go to those places," she said. "All I can require is I expect them to be in a classroom in Second Life which by the way doesn't have four walls because it never rains; you don't have to wear shoes because it doesn't hurt to walk."

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## STORYCHAT

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