

It never rains in Second Life

Rebecca Nymann has never taught a class like Cyber101. It is a Certificate II Multimedia online course. Here she is avatar Rebecca Naylor, standing before 15 avatars in the virtual replica of her college computer room. Such is the world of Second Life. The only difference is that the classroom has no roof.

Launched in 2003 by California-based Linden Lab, Second Life is a website where users create animated cartoon avatars to represent themselves, usually as humans or sometimes as fantasy or furry creatures. Linden sells land in this virtual frontier and users design and make everything from virtual shopping malls to virtual sweaters for the avatars. They buy and sell things that exist only 'in world'. You can look at a movie, chat to friends, gamble, teach classes, make music and visit restaurants all in an elaborate computer constructed virtual landscape that give Second Life its world beyond feel.

The experiment with Second Life gave Rebecca's distance education students a virtual place to meet and work on class projects. 'It's better than simply posting videos of lectures

online and communicating by email,' she said.

Some 80 academic and vocational institutions are exploring the possibilities of using Second Life. Some predict it will engage people around the world in new and different ways. 'Second Life brings a special element to personal interaction that you can't get online,' says psychologist Daniel Sedgman.

Critics of Second Life say the virtual experience can be a substitute for a real life. Noel Tennyson, a graphics designer works all day and regularly spends six to eight hours a night in Second Life. His real social life has suffered but he says he has just as much fun in the virtual world. Other users see the increasing presence of major corporations like Microsoft and Telstra as a commercialisation of the online world.

Rebecca Naylor and her students are engaged in more than a game. To them it's a learning environment with a Wonderland quality. That's why it never rains in Second Life.

(Adapted from a news story from the *New Age Chronicle*.)