

3-D Simulation Shatters Traditional Boundaries

March 25, 2011 1:00 AM Cody Wild
newwave@tulane.edu

For generations, education has been constrained primarily to the classroom, where information is transmitted by the written and spoken word. However, a group of educators is beginning to shatter these traditional boundaries by creating virtual worlds using Open Simulator, a 3-D application server through which pedagogy can be brought to life in novel and unprecedented ways.



Kay McLennan, a professor of practice in the School of Continuing Studies, and her avatar teach business ethics scenarios on Tulane's "island" within an Open Simulator virtual world.

Kay McLennan and her avatar are teaching business ethics scenarios on a Tulane virtual "island."

For McLennan, a professor of practice in the [School of Continuing Studies](#) who is involved in this effort, integrating the virtual world as an educational tool "enables easy and inexpensive modeling of detailed learning simulations" on a platform where students, each with their own avatar, feel a keen sense of immersion.

McLennan, whose primary teaching focus is economics for non-majors and other business studies courses, has created applications such as 3D economic models, a free-trade game where students (each the president of an island nation) must trade their resources to create widgets, and role-playing business ethics case scenarios ? all on Tulane's "island" within the [Open Simulator](#) private region hosted by the Reaction Grid company.

McLennan meticulously crafts together details and elements, shared by programmers in an open-source collaborative spirit, to heighten students' sense of place: realistic lighting and hung paintings accenting ethics role-playing scenes, palm trees swaying on the island nations, grass beneath the avatars feet as they "walk" from place to place.

These models have garnered positive reviews from students in McLennan's classes, where she has begun to offer them as optional activities. They report both enjoyment and an enriched understanding of the concepts, thanks to the interactive and hands-on nature of the technology.

Though McLennan admits that technical expertise, funding and student reticence remain obstacles to virtual-world education's widespread adoption, she believes such obstacles can be overcome as prices inevitably fall and baseline technical literacy begins to rise.

Cody Wild is a first-year student studying English and political economy.