'Second China' offers foreign service workers first impression

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Diplomats or military envoys making their first trip to China may soon have a chance to visit a Chinese office building, stop in at a traditional teahouse or hop a cab — all before they board a plane.

A team of University of Florida computer engineers and scholars has used the popular online world Second Life to create a virtual Chinese city, one that hands a key to users who want to familiarize themselves with the sights and experiences they will encounter as first-time visitors. The goal of the federally funded research project: To educate and prepare foreign service or other government professionals to arrive in the country prepared and ready to work.

"I think what we hope is that this kind of environment can provide a bridge between knowledge alone and actually being in the real-life environment," said Julie Henderson, an international program specialist at the UF College of Pharmacy and co-principal investigator and project designer for the effort.

People have long prepared for international travel with language and cultural instruction, role-playing and, in recent years, distance-learning experiences. The "Second China Project" seeks to add another element: Simulated experiences aimed at introducing users not only to typical sights and the Chinese language, but also to expectations of politeness, accepted business practices and cultural norms.

It may not be the real thing, but it's a lot easier to get there.

As with all Second Life worlds, users' avatars simply "teleport" in to Second China, a city with both old and new buildings that looks surprisingly similar to some of China's fastest growing metropolises. There, they can try a number of different activities — including, for example, visiting an office building for a conference.

"We've built an environment around learning objectives," said Paul Fishwick, lead investigator and a professor of computer and information science and engineering.

In the office simulation, the user's avatar chooses appropriate business attire and a gift, greets a receptionist, and is guided to a conference room to be seated, among other activities. With each scenario, the user gains understanding or awareness: the Chinese formal greeting language and procedure, that it's traditional to bring a gift to a first meeting, that guests typically are seated facing the door in a Chinese meeting room, and so on.

Supplementing the visual experience: A Web-based tutorial that the user can click on as he or she navigates Second China. The tutorial has much more detail about every experience. For example, it lists appropriate as well as inappropriate gifts — such as clocks, which in China are considered bad luck when presented as gifts.

In the teahouse simulation, a greeter shows the visitor photos of well-known personalities who have visited as patrons, a typical practice in many establishments in China. However, in the simulation the photos include, for example, a photo of Hu Jintao, the president of China. The accompanying Web tutorial provides biographical background on Hu and the other well-known Chinese personalities in the photos.

"It's important to be able to go to China already familiar with the important historic and political figures," said Henderson.

In Second Life, users typically control avatars. But in Second China, the teahouse greeter and other avatars in the various scenarios are controlled by computer software. This allows users to enter Second China anytime they wish, while also ensuring that all users have similar experiences, an important trait for an educational tool.

None of the information in Second China is exclusive to the Second Life simulation — it could also be presented in books or other traditional media.

But Fishwick and Henderson think that allowing users to place themselves within Second China's virtual world may make the information more memorable and pique users' curiosity and urge to explore. They'll know more soon: After spending a year developing the project, they'll spend the next year testing it on users to gauge its effectiveness.

"In terms of knowledge and empathy toward the culture, we don't yet know the answer to the question of where one medium succeeds and another one fails," Fishwick said.

Source: University of Florida