

The Avatar

(animated agent) in online learning

By Julia VanderMolen

So, you have started teaching on-line but you realize that your course needs more pizzazz but you worry that the pizzazz will take away from your content. One way to add interest into your course is to add an animated agent or an avatar. Avatars, popularized in 1992 by Neal Stephenson in his cyber-punk novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992) are computerized animated characters that can be integrated into computer-based instructional environments. These characters allow designers and teachers to create environments where learners can interact with a conversational partner to obtain advice, feedback, or instruction. Consistent with early findings of human-computer interaction, avatars allow for a realistic social interaction (Reeves & Nass, 1996). By using advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, avatars can be designed to support or facilitate learning by providing a teacher-student interaction with the learner (Shaw, Johnson, & Ganeshan, 1999; Slater, 2000). Avatars have been used in many capacities and have been shown to be effective in teaching, largely due to their impression of a realistic social interaction (e.g., Atkinson, 2002; Lester et al., 1997; Moreno, Mayer, Spire, & Lester, 2001).

Creating an avatar offers the ability to reinvent yourself. However, there are some things you should think about before you begin the process: settle

whether you want a name that links your avatar with your given name or other names you use online, or if you want to choose one that allows you the freedom of anonymity. Chose a name you will be comfortable answering to in the wide variety of interactions you will have online, including teaching and attending classes and social engagements and decide whether you want your avatar name and look to carry through across the different virtual worlds you might visit.

So how do you create your avatar? Below is one tool that offers a way to

add an avatar to your course in a seamless way. SitePal (www.sitepal.com) provides a number of models, backgrounds and ways to modify your character to meet the needs of your visual learners.

The first thing you need to do is make sure that you have the necessary technical requirements for creating an avatar using SitePal. SitePal requires the following technical specifications before creating an avatar. Table 1 illustrates the requirements.

Table 1: Technical Requirement for Using SitePal (Oddcast, 2007)

PC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ OS: Windows 95, 98, ME, NT, 2000 or XP■ Browsers: Internet Explorer 5.5, Internet Explorer 6, Firefox, Mozilla, Opera, etc.■ CPU: 400Mhz or faster■ Other: Flash Player 6 or better
Macintosh	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ OS: OS X 10.2 or better or Mac OS 8.1 or newer■ Browsers: Safari, Internet Explorer, Firefox, Mozilla■ CPU: 400Mhz or faster■ Other: Flash Player 6 or better
Linux	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Although SitePal is not officially supported on Linux at this time, Oddcast is not aware of any of the problems or issues with any of the system configurations that we have reviewed.

After checking to see if you have the correct technical requirements, you can begin to build your avatar. Enter the email address and password for your SitePal account. It is important to note that you will need to create an account with SitePal and confirm your registration prior to creating your avatar through SitePal (Additionally, web services or web hosting providers such as Bravenet www.bravenet.com offer SitePal for free with their service).



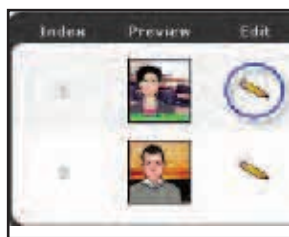
Figure 1—SitePal Login Page

Once you have logged into your account, your SitePal Scene List page will load and display your account information. Click on the Enter button to access the Scenes.



Figure 2—Edit Scenes

Click the Edit Pencil for the Scene that you wish to change. This will open the Scene Editor.



Creating or Modifying Your Avatar Character

You can begin to create your own avatar by selecting a pre-configured SitePal Model and modifying its accessories, features and colors. Let's get started by clicking the Model tab at the top of the Tools Panel. Then click the arrows on either side of the thumbnail images to view the different models provided by

SitePal. Once you have found the model you would like to represent you, click the thumbnail image of the model. The model you selected appears in the Preview Panel. Figure 4 illustrates the SitePal Model Tab with the Model Tab and the Preview Panel as Step 1 and Step 2.

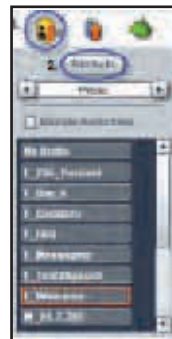


Add Audio to Your Scene

SitePal uses advanced technology to synchronize your audio recordings with your character's lip movements which can enhance the personalization of your website or online classroom. To add audio to a SitePal scene you will need a microphone or an audio software editing program such as Audacity audacity.sourceforge.net. One of the great features of SitePal is its text to speech options. This is great for designing your course to be ADA compliant.

Customize Your Scene

SitePal Scene allows you to customize your background. Backgrounds give your SitePal Scenes context and atmosphere. You can use the predefined backgrounds that are included with SitePal (education, holidays and US cities just to name a few) or you can upload your own images to use in your Scenes. You could add your school logo, an image of your school's building or your physical classroom. SitePal recommends background in .jpg file format and should be 300 x 225 pixels in size.



Set Options for Your Scene

To set your options for your Scene, click Scene Options for the Scene you just saved. The Scene Options window



appears. Then under Playback Settings, on the first drop-down menu, select Limit to 2 for the playback limit. On the second drop-down menu, select per day for the period of time for the playback

limit. Your Scene will play as soon as the Scene is loaded. The Scene will be played twice to each viewer in a day. You can select unlimited to play the Scene every time the page loads. The viewer can still click the Play button to play the Scene at any time.

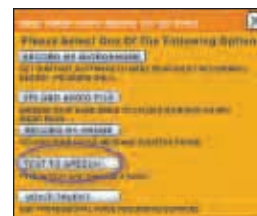


Publish Your Scene

Publishing a Scene means to embed, or insert, the code for a SitePal Scene in a Web page or a Web environment. The embedded code generates a link to your Scene which is hosted on an Oddcast server. You use the SitePal Publish Wizard to set the properties for your embedded code and copy the code into a Web environment. The first step is to pick the Scene you wish to publish. The Publish Wizard window will appear. SitePal offers the option to embed your avatar into a webpage, as a flash movie, it can be emailed, embedded in a myspace page, or it can be added to an eBay auction. SitePal offers the HTML code for you to copy and paste into



```
Copy the code, then Paste the code before the </body> tag in your HTML.
<div id="divVHSS"></div><script language="JavaScript" type="text/javascript"
src="http://vhst.oddcast.com/vhst_embed_functions.php?acc=69946&js=1"></script>
<script language="JavaScript" type="text/javascript">AC_VHst_Embed_69946(285, 380,
FFFFFF, 1, 1, 901852, 0, 1, 0, '82e47c9c87a5eb2706588eb692325d0', 6,
390|285|-424|25|R|T|true|1|1|0|)|http%3A//vhst-s.oddcast.com/ccs2/vhst/user/4ab/
```



your webpage so you do not have to learn HTML.

So you see adding an avatar to your online class or your website is quite simple. Through practice you too can add an element of interactive learning to your class. □

Additional Resources:

www.sitepal.com/showcase.php
www.imvu.com/

Citations

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Dr. Julia VanderMolen is the Director of Online Instruction with Davenport University. She has been a member of MACUL for over 11 years and has presented for MACUL for the past six years on a number of technology integration topics. She can be reached at julia.vander-molen@davenport.edu.



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