

Studying cyberspace
by Therese Carfagno
June 25, 2008



The artist Bryn Oh has made a robotics centre where they study if a robot mother can feel love.

[NEW CAERLEON](#) – On the wall is a list on all kinds of exciting subjects: Virtual Art School, Center for the Study of AI, Robotics and A-Life, Center for the Study of the Self in Cyberspace, and many other things. Diverse as they may seem, they all have one thing in common.

"They all involve this new medium that's cyberspace and virtual worlds. We are going to try and make sense of this phenomenon here."

So said Georg Janick, aka Gary Zabel, professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He's the mastermind behind both the old Caerleon island, in many ways an artists' colony, and New Caerleon, which will be more of an educational sim and an open source university.

Having worked with computers and the Internet for many years, he came to Second Life eight months ago with a goal "to create a colony of artists and writers who would collaborate and teach, and that has been very successful. But I also wanted to expand into other areas, and that's the purpose of New Caerleon," explained Janick.

"This seemed like the next step to me: Bringing higher education into the virtual world, and the virtual world to my students. We have five university professors here right now, including me, and many others, like artists, writers and activists – all of whom will teach here and conduct research," said Janick.

He describes them as an international lot; Americans, French, Australian, and Italian – some he knows from first life, others he's met in SL.

He will himself teach cosmology, philosophy of mind, robotics, and art history at New Caerleon. "I gave a course in cosmology in SL last semester for my RL students, and I'm currently giving some lectures on 20th century art in Caerleon."

Janick describes the experience of teaching in SL as great. "My students loved it. Both being in SL, and having access to people from all over the world. Hard work, but it paid off."

"My view in general," said Janick, "is that people are dying to learn and be creative, but they are blocked by deadening jobs and bureaucracy. If you give them a chance to learn and be creative, without the constraints of the market and administration, they blossom."

Janick thinks the best parts of SL testifies to that. "Why else would people come here and learn to use the crappy tools that SL has just in order to make things, to shape their environments, and create new worlds? It's because they have a tremendous need to create," said Janick.

Bryn Oh is one of the artists that's been residing on Caerleon. As they will teach robotics at New Caerleon, Janick asked her to build a robotics centre.

"I'm not sure if they were thinking of this kind of build," said Oh, having been given free hands to build what she liked. True to her tradition from earlier builds, she's placed a narrative in the building: Small notes can be found here and there, hinting towards something that might be a modern Frankenstein story.

"I was thinking all buildings should have a narrative to make them more interesting," said Oh. Her building is placed underwater, and has robot mice, crickets, and a mother with child. "To see if she can love. It seemed like an experiment the scientists might try."

New Caerleon is open for all to see, and courses will start in a few weeks' time, around the end of the summer holiday.