Missouri Humanities Council's Online Immersive Learning Study Project: Rocca Sorrentino in "Second Life"
by Geoff Giglierano
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Although much "new" technology often seems to become outdated with dramatic rapidity, various platforms and tools have proven remarkably useful even after the height of their popularity has passed. The Missouri Humanities Council has found this to be the case with the 3-D virtual world "Second Life." Although it is no longer heavily promoted as a business and educational platform, SL—and similar platforms that function as "shared creativity tools"—offer users opportunities to generate their own content and interact with diverse audiences.

Three years ago, MHC had the opportunity to take over a high-quality historical 18th century environment in Second Life. By further developing and expanding this build and generating associated learning activities, MHC found a means to engage with individuals and groups from various backgrounds and locations in exploring the potential to promote the humanities though virtual worlds, and to help us learn more about how people acquire, share and assimilate information and ideas in these new creative spaces.

Within this virtual space, a community of learners has grown up under the co-leadership of MHC Director Geoff Giglierano and Dr. Katheryn Spoehr of Brown University. Community members—some of whom are scholars and educators, as well as interested members of the general public—have used this virtual space as a platform for experiments with programming that focuses on the Enlightenment and the history, arts, and material culture of the 18th century. Every month they organize and present an average of five public events such as virtual exhibit openings, and both moderated and informal discussions on literature and social issues of the time period.

The "island," environment, under the name "Rocca Sorrentina," is a composite representation of a southern Italian coastal town set in the year 1784. The continually evolving, 3-D simulation features elements such as a re-creation of an Enlightenment-era "cabinet of curiosities," fortifications, harbor, shops and homes, and a Palladian-style villa. This virtual space and its associated programmatic activities attract a diverse audience of between 600 to 800 individuals per month. They take part in what one community member has described as "cooperative self-directed learning." Dr. Spoehr has also compared it to "Montessori for adults, in which there is learning through play, reinforced by lessons at teachable moments."

It is extremely cost-effective, as all participants—including the community leaders—participate as volunteers on their own time and the community itself contributes to help underwrite expenses. MHC and the community members hope to continue the experiment for at least another year, with the ultimate goal of sharing an assessment of the outcomes with colleagues who have an interest in this type of technology.

If you would like more information about the project, please contact MHC Executive Director Geoff Giglierano at geoff@mohumanities.org.