INFORMATIC TRANSFORMATION: The Second Life version of the city's School of Informatics

New university block comes to Second Life

Virtual school based on LA hotel is part of latest internet craze

■ JANE BRADLEY

IT is Edinburgh University's most ambitious building yet – a five-storey plate-glass replica of a landmark hotel in Los Angeles.

While some previous university architecture – notably the Appleton Tower – has been denounced as a blight on the Old Town skyline, this latest venture has no planning permission and costs just £37 a year. In fact, the university's newest School of Informatics is not in the Capital or even in Scotland – it is in the online virtual reality world Second Life.

The latest internet craze allows users to reinvent themselves in the form of cartoon-like images called avatars, to set up businesses and design their own homes and offices.

Now a professor at the university's Artificial Intelligence Applications Institute (AIAI) has created two buildings on Second Life to host the School of Informatics and the School of Artificial Intelligence.

Professor Austin Tate says he plans, in time, to redesign the virtual buildings to more closely resemble their real-life counterparts in the Southside. He said he

AI RIGHT: Prof Austin Tate

hopes the facilities will be used as a venue for students to give presentations, carry out experiments, relax over a coffee and possibly even host lectures to real-life students in the virtual world.

The project comes just months after the real launch of the Informatics department's new Crichton Street building.

Professor Tate, known online as "AI Austin", said he envisaged the Second Life buildings, designed by a "professional" Second Life architect and based on LA's famous Bonaventure Hotel, becoming an integral part of the department's property portfolio.

He said: "At first, I wanted us to have a presence on Second Life to show people that we are keeping ahead of the latest technology.

"Now, I can see the possibilities of property like this being an extension of the department's

physical property. For example, if there are certain types of robotics we cannot leave out in public areas because they are too delicate, we can have them on display in Second Life for people to look at."

He added: "We chose the Bonaventure Hotel because it was a good shape, but in the future, we might redesign the buildings to be more like Appleton Tower and Crichton Street as a bit of fun."

The virtual reality of Second Life allows students to pour themselves a cup of steaming coffee and relax in a comfortable chair, while the department's corporate presence on Second Life goes as far as to include branded mugs and T-shirts – which can only be used by characters within the virtual world and have been handed out to avatar versions of Nasa employees by Professor Tate at virtual meetings.

Councillor Bob Cairns, whose ward takes in both Appleton Tower and the new building on Crichton Street, said: "In an ideal world, and possibly on Second Life, I would like to see George Square as it was before most of the buildings were demolished.

"My preference, in real life, would be for Appleton Tower to be pulled down as it is one of the least attractive buildings in Edinburgh from the 1960s and 70s – so it definitely wouldn't be top of my list to rebuild in Second Life."

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