



Veterans suffering from PTSD can visit virtual Chicoma Island for help

By [Bob Brewin](#) 09/01/09

[View slideshow of veteran visiting Chicoma Lodge in Second Life.](#)

Combat veterans rarely talk about their most searing hidden emotions and thoughts caused by their experiences in battle, a reticence that can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles is near completing [Coming Home](#), a virtual world in Second Life that its creators hope will help break down the barriers to PTSD treatment, said Jacquelyn Morie, a project leader at ICT.

The institute developed a virtual world that features immersive therapy, which mental health professionals can use to treat Iraq combat veterans suffering from PTSD called [Virtual Iraq](#). The site includes a virtual Iraqi village that veterans can walk through.

ICT initially planned to use the village in Second Life, but in a recent [paper](#) that Morie wrote, a veteran told her that he found the Iraqi village "disturbingly realistic, and he did not believe that any veteran should be allowed to explore the village without a therapist at his side."

The insight led to development of what Morie described as a nonthreatening environment in Second Life that she hopes will become a place of "camaraderie and healing." The work, which began in January, has resulted in Chicoma Island, open only to veterans.

Although the Veterans Affairs Department operates 232 [counseling centers](#) nationwide to help veterans with PTSD, many do not visit them out of fear of confronting their own demons, distrust of VA or because they live too far from a center.

But veterans can visit the island, on which is the virtual Chicoma Lodge, the social center of the island and modeled after the great national park lodges of the western United States, from any computer connected to the Internet. The virtual lodge serves as the social center of the island, providing a variety of places for veterans to hang out comfortably. Visitors can sit on chairs or couches placed in front of one of two roaring fireplaces, and meet and talk to other avatars, virtual characters that visitors to Second Life create to explore the site's islands.

Veterans can enter two game rooms where they can play air hockey, pool and darts. They also can sit at a piano, on which even the most nonmusical veteran can play the "[Moonlight Sonata](#)" like a professional.

To encourage conversation about combat experiences, the veterans' island features a storytelling tower, which includes tales told by virtual warriors from the past. The first story is told by a Cheyenne Indian. ICT plans to add the ethos and ideals of other past cultures, the Celts and the samurai.

Coming Home also includes an artificial intelligence-based avatar that serves as a guide to the island. The guide also can suggest where visitors can access online PTSD treatment.

ICT will encourage physical activity by providing a virtual running track and climbing wall. The island already provides a virtual sandbox, in which veterans can practice their construction skills.

Coming Home will emphasize alternative treatment therapies, including [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#), which combines meditation and yoga, Morie said.

While Chicoma Island is visually appealing, Morie said it is still a work in progress. But she believes the social interaction, offered in a comfortable setting, could promote conversations that can help reduce PTSD.

Veterans who want to explore Chicoma Island should contact Morie at morie@ict.usc.edu for entry.

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