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### A Virtual Clinic to Treat the Stresses of War

By [CLAIRE CAIN MILLER](#)

Many veterans are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious problems, like post-traumatic stress disorder, but only one-third get medical help. One researcher has built a healing center for veterans in a virtual world, where she hopes they will be more comfortable seeking care.

[Jacquelyn Ford Morie](#) is a senior researcher at the [Institute for Creative Technologies](#) at the [University of Southern California](#). She formerly did animation for [Disney](#). She calls her current project, which she presented at the [Web 2.0 Summit](#) on Thursday, Coming Home.

The healing center is in [Second Life](#), a virtual world. It has a big lodge, where people can spend time and talk with each other, anonymously if they prefer. They can sit around a fireplace, play games in the game room or relax on a deck next to a waterfall. They can climb a tower, where they will meet a historical warrior who tells them stories about his life.

There are also real-world interactions in the virtual world. A veteran's avatar can go for a jog. The onscreen action is powered by the human behind the screen breathing in a slow, relaxed way. There is also a stress reduction center, where experts from the [Center for Mindfulness](#) of the [University of California, San Diego](#) can take the form of avatars online and conduct sessions for the veterans. In one of the lodge's rooms, veterans can find bulletin boards with lists of helpful Web sites and other offline resources they can seek out.

"The real world actually can be affected by being in the virtual world," Ms. Morie said.

The Institute for Creative Technologies specializes in building virtual humans, which it uses for marketing and negotiations, or to act as museum guides or help with virtual diagnoses. It was founded in 1999 with a contract from the [United States Army](#) and a mission to explore the intersections among technology, artificial intelligence, Hollywood and gaming.

The veterans project has been financed by the [Army](#) and the [National Science Foundation](#). We have also covered another program, backed by a military health insurer, to use the Web to provide anonymous mental health care to veterans.

Next year, the institute will do pilot studies on the healing center with an Army hospital. It also plans to use virtual humans and virtual worlds to create other places for people to find help, like groups for alcoholics or narcotics users, and a career center.

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