

New Talking Avatars on the MSVU Library Website

Hilary Skov-Nielsen
Reference Librarian
Mount Saint Vincent University
hilary.skovnielsen@msvu.ca

Two talking avatars -- Sarah and Suzie SitePal -- were recently added to the MSVU Library website. By adding the avatars to the site, the Library hopes to make the site more interactive and fun for new and returning students. The avatars



are used to welcome students to the Library, to highlight Library resources and services, and to relay information about Library events. The SitePal software was installed by Denyse Rodrigues, and the avatars were designed and scripted by myself, the Library's new term librarian responsible for public services.



SitePal is a subscription internet service that allows users to create and customize talking avatars to add to websites. For a monthly fee, users can choose from a diverse selection of male and female avatars, can add different backgrounds, accessories, clothing, and can choose from a wide selection of players and pre-recorded voices. SitePal also allows you to record your own voice to add to the avatar. I highly recommend taking advantage of this feature because it adds a more life-like quality to the avatar. The SitePal supplied voices sound robotic and monotone and do not allow for natural inflections in language.

The SitePal design process is user-friendly and consists of a series of visual menus that you use to design your avatar by simply picking and clicking on the many styles and accessories offered. The avatars can also be updated easily, as often as you like, by logging in to your account on the SitePal website and making the necessary changes. Users have the option of creating multiple avatars at the same time, so library staff can add new life to their library website by changing the avatars periodically. The number of avatars you can create depends upon the type of account you subscribe to: Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum. The designer also has control over the avatar placement on the site, and sound options. I set it up so Sarah and Suzie would not play automatically

and they are equipped with a play, pause and mute button. Students control the volume setting and can choose to play the avatars at their convenience.

Embedding the avatar into your library website is also a relatively stress-free process. I tend to break out in hives at the prospect of working with code, but embedding the avatar into the MSVU Library website was as simple as cutting and pasting the code generated by the SitePal website into our website code. I did encounter a minor setback during the launch of the avatars in September. The security features installed on the student computers in the library and in the computer labs prevented the avatars from appearing on the site because they need to be downloaded from the SitePal server and the computers were prevented from accessing the information. After a discussion with the staff in our IT&S department, Sarah and Suzie SitePal were re-launched with great success on November 1st. I would suggest that you discuss your interest in adding an avatar to your website with your IT department before you attempt to launch it.

Student response to the avatars has been very favourable. We have had several comments about Sarah and Suzie SitePal posted to the library blog and it has been positive feedback. We have also received some valuable suggestions to diversify the library avatars. One student suggested that we create different avatars that reflect our diverse student population, including a more mature library avatar to reflect the great number of mature students who attend MSVU. Students are proving that they are engaged with the Library avatars and welcome their presence on the site.

To highlight the launch of the avatars, the Library is hosting a contest for MSVU students to draw attention to Sarah and Suzie's presence on the website. Students have been asked to find Suzie SitePal on the MSVU Library website and listen to what she has to say, fill out an online ballot, and enter to win a prize. Suzie SitePal gives a brief description of an online library resource and students are asked to name the resource or service that Suzie discusses. Our hope is that students will be encouraged to explore these resources further, even though we are using the Suzie SitePal contest and the possibility of winning a prize to lure them in! We plan on highlighting a different online resource each month and due to the ease of updating the avatars within SitePal, this task will be very manageable. During the avatar design process you can also select the style of player for your avatar; I selected a player that doubles as an online ballot. I

set up a Gmail account and linked the account to Suzie SitePal's player. Students submit their names, contact information and answers directly into the form embedded on the player. All submissions are sent directly to the Library Gmail account.

Adding Sarah and Suzie SitePal to the MSVU Library website proved to be an extremely successful endeavour. Student response has been positive and the website benefits from a fresh, new look which is inexpensive, user-friendly and efficient. If you are interested in seeing Sarah and Suzie SitePal in action, go to www.msvu.ca/library. For more information about SitePal, you can visit their website www.sitepal.com.