'Avatar' Coming to Life at Keesler AFB

(Military.com [1]) - BILOXI -- The new blockbuster movie "Avatar" seems total fantasy, yet Keesler Air Force Base already is using avatar technology in a pilot cyberspace program.

Simply defined, an avatar is "you in cyberspace." In the movie, a handicapped former Marine temporarily occupies another body, which is in cyberspace. It's full immersion, like an out-of-body experience.

"You actually are that avatar in that environment. You're inside that body," said Lt. Col. Scott Solomon, commander of the 333rd Training Squadron at Keesler.

"We're not quite there yet," he said of the avatar's capabilities in the film.

Anyone can build an avatar. With Second Life and other popular Internet sites, your avatar can socialize and travel the world on the computer screen. Keesler's pilot program My Base is a secure virtual-reality classroom in which the instructor and students create avatars of themselves and interact within the computer program in cyberspace.

Solomon said older students generally choose the body of a Gumby character and a picture of their own faces. The younger students choose to personalize their avatars, adding such things as their rank and organizational patches.

"Some of that is how comfortable you are operating in that environment," he said.

In the virtual classroom, the students can talk to each other via instant messaging or by using their headsets for live audio and video. They can collaborate on documents and exercises, and watch Powerpoint presentations or video from their favorite vantage spots -- looking up from the floor or hovering in the air. Solomon said the Air Force will compare the results of the pilot program with conventional

training to see if cyber training is successful. Avatar training potentially could be used anywhere, he said, rather than bringing airmen from around the world to Keesler.

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