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Avatars beware: Private investigators scouring Second Life

Tue Jul 22, 2008 2:13pm PDT

By [Eric Reuters](#)

Be careful, that avatar on your sim could be a real-life private investigator, sent in to report on what you're up to in your Second Life.

Last weekend, veteran private investigator Steven Rambam of detective firm Pallorium came to New York to give a talk about privacy and investigation techniques at the Hackers On Planet Earth conference. After Rambam told attendees how he tracked down one target inside Second Life, Reuters caught up with the private detective to find out what happened.

Rambam's client told him this story: Twenty years ago as a child, he had been molested by one of his grade school teachers, a trauma he never fully recovered from. "The client believes/d that pedophiles don't 'retire' — I absolutely agree — and he wanted to prevent the target from molesting anyone else," Rambam said in an email. "We were retained to investigate, gather evidence, and if evidence was found then convince the target to retire from teaching."

So Rambam started looking into his target — now an assistant principal — and discovered the man was a Second Life user. Pallorium investigators logged into Second Life and tracked down the man's avatar, only to discover his Second Life identity was a leather-clad dominatrix.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. "The avatar by itself would not have been conclusive evidence of anything," Rambam said. "The most significant evidence that we gathered was collected old-school: we identified other possible victims, interviewed them, and one person told a story very similar to what we'd heard from our client."

But Second Life users should be aware, Rambam noted, that investigators are increasingly well-versed at using the virtual world.

Rambam caught a lucky break in tracking down the man. When Kevin Alderman hired private investigators to track the real-life identity of avatar Volkov Catteneo, Alderman had to work from IP addresses. Without giving away the tricks of his trade, Rambam said he came across his target's avatar name "during a very preliminary phase of our investigation."

Photo: Eric Krangel / Reuters

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