Dreaming of a 3-D Web
Brad Stone

Vivaty, the company I wrote about in Monday's paper, represents the fulfillment of a 14-year-old dream to bring 3-D images to the Web.

The company, which will begin a private test of its service on Facebook this week, wants to offer 3-D chat rooms and social environments on any blog, Web site or social networking page. These will be integrated into the Web — smaller but easier to access versions of massively multiplayer platforms like Second Life.

Early Web designers have been thinking about three-dimensional Web images since the Web was first gestating in 1994. They created the VRML standard, so Web browsers could interpret 3-D graphics like a cube or logo, or other complex objects on a static Web page.

The format pretty much flopped: today VRML is thought of as something of a failed experiment that got bogged down amid academic discussions and the competing agendas of big, plodding companies like SGI. Its successor, the X3D standard, was more successful and is used today to integrate 3D graphics into the popular MPEG-4 audio and video standard.

But the Web has largely failed to go 3-D. Online games like Habbo and Club Penguin are what video game designers disparagingly call 2.5-D. Characters move around at predefined angles and the action is presented from a fixed, overhead viewpoint.

A Vivaty world, on the other hand, is like a 3-D video game –- dynamic, richly textured and multi-angled.

Tony Parisi, the vice president and chief platform officer of Vivaty, was one of the key contributors to the VRML and X3D standards. Mr. Parisi and his colleagues see those standards as a starting point, but they have written their own proprietary 3-D platform which they think will make the Web more social and immediate — just like a video game.

"Nothing is as immersive as a full 3-D environment," Mr. Parisi said via e-mail. "And nothing is as relevant as a 3-D experience you control with your own content and share with your own friends."

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