

Second Life: Tamed for Corporate Consumption

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I.B.M. and Linden Lab, the creator of Second Life, are placing a stake in the ground today for corporate virtual worlds. The two companies have started a joint project to run Second Life technology behind corporate firewalls.

The goal, they say, is to offer companies "secure, flexible and customizable" 3-D virtual environments that are designed and controlled by corporations. The initial effort is a demonstration project, running Second Life technology on I.B.M. servers, behind a Big Blue firewall. But the companies plan to introduce a corporate offering before the end of this year, either as a product or as a service, presumably hosted by I.B.M.

"This is something people have been clamoring for in Second Life," said Ginsu Yoon, vice president of business affairs for Linden Lab.

Second Life has plenty of corporate users already, more than 100, says Mr. Yoon, running the gamut from Ben & Jerry's to Toyota. Many companies have virtual storefronts for marketing their products to the presumably hip, younger consumers who frequent Second Life. Others, like I.B.M. and Intel, have used Second Life for meetings, product development and designing simulated services.

But Second Life is a freewheeling virtual world, open to the public including anonymous pranksters and hackers. It is loosely governed and managed by Linden Lab. And that has made many companies reluctant to let their employees venture into virtual worlds, which management experts hail as an innovative tool for richer and more nuanced communication and collaboration among workers, industry partners and customers.

"We talk to customers all the time who want to use this technology in their companies, but they worry about keeping the conversations and information secure," said Neil Katz, chief technology officer of I.B.M.'s digital convergence unit.

Corporate gated communities in virtual worlds, according to Mr. Yoon, will be the equivalent of corporate intranets on the Web. An employee's avatar can travel easily in the outside realm, but only the ones with company I.D.'s can get inside the firewall.

A useful analogy, but a limited one. Traveling around the public Internet, Web and intranets is easy because they are based on common technology standards for communication and data handling. In virtual worlds, there is a push for common standards, but avatars don't yet move with ease across different virtual platforms, Second Life and others.

For Linden Lab, the joint project with I.B.M., it seems, is an effort to make its technology platform a common standard — the Windows of virtual worlds. But for many corporate uses, it is not clear that Second Life offers any advantage over competitors like ActiveWorlds or OpenSim, an open source virtual world technology.

For example, a corporate brainstorming session or product-design simulation exercise would be attended by relatively small numbers of interested people, company employees or partners, not the wider Second Life world. The advantage, though, may well become apparent if a company already has a virtual storefront on Second Life. Then, the corporate technology staff can avoid the mysteries of navigating more than one virtual world.

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