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HAS ANYONE BUILT THE PERFECT VIRTUAL WORLD?

IF NOT, WHAT CHARACTERISTICS WILL IT HAVE?

28 February 2008

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Has Anyone Built the Perfect Virtual World?

/ Begin Rant

No. We do not think the perfect virtual world (VW) has been built yet. Also, we don't think that anything currently in development comes close either. We do think that it is important for new worlds to be created, but we fear that the VW sector will suffer many of the same problems that are being encountered in the Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) market. Mainly, that a significant amount of venture funding will be spent on worlds that will have difficulty differentiating themselves from competitors; that they will continuously be "dumbed down" in an attempt to appeal to the mass market and subsequently have problems with high turnover; and a variety of other problems. If this occurs, it will stifle development of new worlds. Recovery will be difficult at best.

We have been having an extraordinarily tough time finding funding for our own MMORPG approach because of the stellar failures of poorly conceived and mediocre titles (long list) or ventures that have been grossly mismanaged and gone up in flames (Sigil, Perpetual, etc.). Never mind that we would be developing the first super-computer powered virtual world (game or otherwise) that features a truly dynamic AI-driven ecology based on artificial life and evolutionary computation technologies...the world evolves, adapts, and grows based on user actions (or inaction as the case might be). We have totally different and radical approaches to design, game mechanics, community and collaborative tools, original IP, etc. we don't mean to sound arrogant, but we really believe that we could totally change the way MMORPGs are designed and knock World of Warcraft off the block. Be that as it may, while we always get interest from venture capitalists, they refuse to seriously consider anything that remotely smells like a "content deal", and they are all deathly afraid of MMORPGs. Unfortunately, many of the same funds view virtual worlds in a similar fashion, but more as a novelty or fad without any real potential.

Anyway, our point is that as Second Life (and others) continues to mature and develop, the sector will begin to draw more venture interest, especially as established companies invest resources into leveraging virtual world technologies for business...not just creating a presence with some advertising, but using it for legitimate research in simulations, business intelligence, collaboration, cyber-sociology, and all of the other nifty things we are sure we don't have to list or explain to you. There is definitely a growing opportunity right now, but we are not seeing anyone really jumping on it in a way to really capitalize on the trend.

We can't help but feel that both industries, MMORPG and VW, are "missing the point" to a great degree and missing out on the bigger picture and many opportunities. For the past few years we've focused on MMORPGs, but have decided to expand our focus this year to simulations, artificial intelligence, artificial life, virtual worlds, virtual reality, augmented reality, and so forth. We've written on this topic before...it is 2008 now, and it feels like virtual worlds are not much different than they were in the mid-90s and that MMORPGs seem to be devolving instead of innovating.

The whole industry, being defined as everything that qualifies as "interactive and immersive media that is persistent and online", is in desperate need of convergence and multi-discipline cross-pollination. Setting aside MMORPGs for a moment, as specialized applications that emphasize entertainment in a closed environment, let us explain further and eventually make our way to answering the question: "Has anyone built the perfect virtual world." We apologize if we are a bit long winded, but we are rather passionate about these topics and have a lot to say.

Any negative feedback will result in your assimilation. Resistance is futile.

End Rant /

Convergence

Virtual worlds have the potential to be something great that can cause significant cultural change, increase societal intelligence and maturity, and act as cornerstones for the development of many new technologies, products, and even entire new industries. Influence on this grand scale can only occur when the right visionaries and thinkers are able to bring together the right technological elements (virtual worlds, virtual reality, augmented reality, AI, Alife, intelligent agents, collaborative tools, smart objects, simulations technology, RFID, wearable computing, mobile computing, etc.) and create something new and more powerful...next-generation in the truest sense.

As it stands now, we are still ten years or so away (following the current pace of the industry), but this could be shortened to less than three if the right combination of people and resources coalesces quickly. We do not think that the team at Linden has the vision or expertise to achieve this. A huge opportunity exists.

Platform, not World

The perfect (or maybe ultimate) virtual world will not be a virtual world. It will be a platform. It needs to be extremely simple and intuitive to use and navigate, it needs to be modular and extensible (with robust third party development tools...both for basic users and advanced developers), it needs to have a singular overarching cultural and communal brand identity (more on this below), it must provide for private spaces (from room to world), it must facilitate community and commerce far beyond what is available in current worlds, and it must break the "fourth wall" and tap into mobile computing and augmented reality technologies.

It must appeal to and meet the individual needs of the mass market, businesses, academics, researchers, politicians, entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, gamers, simulations, and industry. It must be both a wide open sandbox and a loose collection of private spaces. It must give people ownership and self-governance, while having multiple levels of control and moderation (yes, this is possible, even though it sounds a bit contradictory).

It must also expose meta data for tracking, analysis, research, and easy access feeds (for linking to other sites, blogs, e-commerce, facebook, whatever). It must, above all else, empower and facilitate users. It must provide a basic context and consistency, and then it must fully embrace community driven growth and evolution. It should be designed with this in mind from the start as a core design requirement...not included later as add-on features.

The design philosophy to build this needs to encompass methodologies and concepts for creating social spaces and networks, collaborative tools, immersive and evolving environments, engaging content, user created/generated content, and so forth. Game designers don't seem to understand the very MMORPGs they are building and are blind to what makes virtual worlds more sociable and collaborative. At the same time, virtual world designers seem to be more interested in dress-up avatars and playing house, while missing the important concepts behind creating engaging and contextual environments.

Virtual world builders must think like game designers and game designers must think like virtual worlds builders. Psychologists, economists, biologists, sociologists, architects, writers, technologists, futurists, city planners, anthropologists, and a variety of other specialists should all be tapped for their unique perspectives and expertise during the early stages of the core design. They all have something to contribute that could be used to influence both engineering and production of the platform and world that will have far reaching effects. The great potential of virtual worlds isn't simply that you can make a custom avatar and interact with other people in a persistent 3D space while triggering dance emotes. It is, and can be so much more if we simply take the right approach and strive to create, craft, forge, and cultivate. Do you remember the sense of excitement and joy that pervaded our industries in the early 90s? What happened? Are we that afraid to be ambitious and creative because of the dot com crash? Did we burn our collective fingers too much?

Anyway, we digress. The ultimate virtual world platform also needs to be accessible from multiple client types...mobile, browser, casual client (light download) and advanced client (huge download). They all don't need to show the same thing, and certainly there are levels of access and data that can be abstracted.

Making a platform alone won't do the trick. It needs to have a fully fleshed out virtual world that acts as the central hub or heart, and it needs to enable users to create their own spaces and walled gardens within. We call this the nested world approach. Content, that is consistent and contextual, is critical for an early virtual world. There needs to be a "there" there for people to explore and adopt as their new home. Sometimes a blank slate offers too much and not enough at the same time.

Walled Gardens

Leaders and luminaries both have decried the concept of "walled gardens" and insist that a fully open and unmoderated (anarchistic) approach is necessary to penetrate the mass market and achieve utopia. We think this is definitely the wrong way to look at things.

The best approach is a nested worlds or multiple gardens schema. You have to have a base level of commonality and shared space. While Koster's Areae is akin to giving everyone their own website, only small communities or groups of friends can flourish here, and it will be hard for people to connect. [Robert Rice blogged about this recently](#).

We'll use Myspace and Facebook as examples...how many of those people have their own websites? Communities and networks that are part of a larger community or world flourish much better. My fencing club is different from the boxing club, and Raleigh is different from Austin. North Carolina is different from Texas. London is different from New York. Shanghai is different from Tokyo. Brazil is different from India. However, we all share a common identity as people who live on Earth. Second Life users identify with being Second Life citizens (even with the vast degree of individualism and disparate content within the world).

At the same time though, people want to have their own spaces. I want my own virtual world, but I don't need my own planet. I want to have my own apartment where I can do what I want, but I also crave belonging to a community in an apartment building, the community of my neighborhood or town, and my own city or state. Are you a Giants fan or a Patriots fan?

What we are trying to say is that there needs to be a master virtual world built on a platform that lets users create their own spaces, communities, environments, and worlds within that larger scope.

We can't even count the number of people that ask us about collaborative tools for business or some artsy or educational use that are dissatisfied with Second Life and its competitors or they can't find the functionality they want. Or researchers looking for a good virtual world they can run simulations in, or try to evolve artificial life, but need a private area where they have the right amount of control they need. The same goes for some techpreneur types...while SL has done a lot with RMT, they have barely scratched the surface.

Geez, this is already page three of our braindump and we hope you haven't fallen asleep at your keyboard.

We haven't even gotten to the good parts yet or the augmented reality stuff. Our vision of a perfect/ultimate virtual world platform is to extend it into the realm of augmented reality (breaking the fourth wall we mentioned earlier). The technology is out there, it just needs someone to build it. I'm sure you have heard of some AR experiments in SL already...where people try to link their real world position to update their avatar's position. There are SO many other things that could be done here.

Most AR technology and applications on the market that are getting attention are based on overlaying graphics on a video feed that is displayed on a screen or monitor (mobile or PC). This by itself is pretty cool, particularly when you combine GPS, RFID, and bar codes (QR Code, DataMatrix, etc.). At a minimum, our perfect virtual world should be open and accessible to these technologies and have all sorts of features (we won't bore you with more detail here). But what if we added a real level of immersion to this? What if we had a wearable display that looked like a normal pair of glasses that overlaid graphics (3D) on what you see? No LCD displays needed. No occluding your vision. No headaches or motion sickness. What if the virtual world could now be interacted with in the real world? What if your hands became your interface/input control? Wireless...no gloves. What if you were at a café, and a 3D "hologram" of your friend's avatar was sitting in front of you and interacting with you...while in the virtual world, both of your avatars are sitting together, and your friend is sitting in a cybercafé in china interfacing through a regular computer? Can you imagine a gathering in second life for an art show? But what if the position of those avatars was mirrored in the real world, or vice versa?

What if you could walk down the street and take a few pictures of a building and upload them to a server where they are manipulated a bit, and the virtual version of that building in our little perfect virtual world suddenly looks a little more lifelike with better textures?

What if your virtual pet could follow you around in the real world and interact with other virtual pets on the street?

Everything here is totally doable, and much of it with current "off the shelf" technology. The glasses are a reality as well. The military is evaluating them and the manufacturer will have a commercial prototype ready this summer.

We are constantly thinking and trying to solve problems (like a gesture based interface that tracks your hands without wires, gloves, or electromagnetic sensing). We are building the network and platform for everything we have described above, as well as building the wireless AR system (with those lovely glasses). We will have working prototypes within 12-18 months and an early commercial launch in 24-30 months (give or take).

We know this sounds pretty aggressive and ambitious, but we have a killer engineering team, and many of our backgrounds are in MMORPGs and Virtual Reality (yeah, Robert was doing VR stuff back around 92 or so). We know the technology and we know how to fit the puzzle pieces together. We can build it and we can change *everything.* Seriously. Wireless, mobile AR combined with a next-generation virtual world *platform* designed the right way would be insane. People think web 2.0 is hot...they haven't seen anything yet.

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it. Really smart people with reasonable funding can do just about anything that doesn't violate too many of Newton's Laws!" - Alan Kay

"The present is theirs; the future, for which I have really worked, is mine." - Nikola Tesla

"Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding..." - William Gibson, Neuromancer