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Forrester: Virtual worlds becoming important to business

by Heather Havenstein

January 9, 2008 —While virtual worlds like [Second Life](#) have come under fire for failing to provide enough value to businesses with established storefront operations, a new [Forrester Research Inc.](#) report argues that the 3-D Internet will be as important to companies in five years as the Web is today.

The "[Getting Work Done in Virtual Worlds](#)" report released by the IT research firm this week concludes that executives should begin investigating and experimenting with virtual worlds soon because of their promise for remote collaboration, training and the ability to build and share 3-D models.

The report said that today's collaboration tools offer far more limited benefits to companies. For example, the inability to see the gestures of fellow meeting goers causes problems for attendees in different offices, the report noted.

In a virtual world, people can have their name, job title and business unit associated with an avatar that can attend meetings and have access to virtual buildings, rooms, equipment and people, Forrester said. The avatar is controlled by information in an enterprise directory and access control system, it said.

"You can easily direct your avatar to express gestures and emotions ... plus you can leave behind real-world unpleasantness such as the poor heat in your cubicle while your next door neighbor is burning or the loud guy talking the phone next to you," according to the report. "[In meetings] you always know who is talking and who's anxious to jump into conversation because they are waving their hand or jumping up and down in the corner of the room.

"In a virtual meeting room, you can see who is present, and more importantly, who is multi-tasking, who has raised a hand or who has been away from their keyboard so long that their avatar has fallen asleep," the report said.

The virtual model is especially important for professionals like surgeons, architects, engineers and product designers, who use CAD models or visualization systems to explore or create projects, Forrester said. In virtual meetings, these professionals can import models for discussion and modification, according to the report.

"You can release near-final designs to a limited group of external users



and solicit feedback before starting fabrication," it said.

Starwood Hotels used Second Life to trial its new Aloft hotel concept designed for urban 30- to 50-year-olds, Forrester noted, while Princeton University has undertaken a similar project to manage distributed teams working on a large-scale astrophysics project.

Virtual worlds can also eliminate the expense of remote training and provide a better experience by simulating on the job experiences as well as recording the training so that multiple sessions can be run across time zones and different job descriptions, according to Forrester.

The report noted that the University of Maryland worked with the I-95 Corridor Coalition to build a virtual world simulation of highway emergencies using the OLIVE Platform from Forterra Systems Inc., which allows participants to assume a role like a firefighter or police officer and interact with others in a simulated emergency.

In addition, it said that Duke University and Virtual Heroes Inc. are collaborating to create a high-fidelity 3-D virtual environment for health care. That effort, funded by the US Army, combines gaming concepts with health care coordination to help train health care professionals in team work and communication skills.

The research effort did find that many businesses are holding back from virtual efforts due to the notion of some people that virtual worlds are frivolous places "where deviant personalities can exhibit their alter egos" and by the advanced skills -- similar to those used by sophisticated gamers -- required to operate one, it said. In addition, typical materials associated with meetings like word processing documents and spreadsheets are likely to be missing from a virtual world. Finally, virtual worlds are usually bandwidth hogs that are likely to hang or require multiple reboots, Forrester added.

To offset such challenges, Forrester recommends that companies first experiment with a virtual world, where set up costs can be as low as \$60 per user per month. At the same time, companies should set up policies defining the acceptable use of virtual world and "keep a laser-like focus on the desired outcome" like making remote workers feel more like a part of the company or reducing manufacturing costs, the report noted.

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