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This Is Not a Game: Virtual Worlds Coming to Your Business, Forrester Predicts

– C.G. Lynch, CIO

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In five years, enterprise versions of online virtual worlds like [Second Life](#) will be just as important to business as the Web is today, and the trend will make it useful for companies to begin experimenting with 3-D online environments for in-house collaboration projects.

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That's the message in a new report by [Forrester Research](#).

Erica Driver, the Forrester analyst who authored the report, says it might take businesses a little while to ready themselves for a foray into virtual worlds. It is very large organizations that the report cites as leading adopters; projects at places like [IBM](#), [BP](#), [Intel](#) and the [U.S. Army](#) are going ahead. For many others, it will take not only resources, but much training for users to make virtual worlds productive.

"I do foresee a time when I have four monitors on my desk, one of which is my virtual office," Driver says. "But for most people right now, it's still too difficult to use."

Unlike social networking sites like [Facebook](#), blogging software and other online applications, participating in a virtual world takes both know-how and practice (think of learning how to create an avatar, manipulating it in the virtual world and more). It's no wonder that virtual worlds haven't been quite as widely embraced. A [Comscore report](#) in May 2007 said that the most popular haven't for consumers, [Second Life](#), counted about 1.3 million active users.

While Driver says it's not too difficult to navigate virtual worlds with some practice, it still takes time and needs to be easier to use.

But as developers make these online applications easier to use, Driver says virtual worlds will become attractive for organizations that have distributed staffs and many remote workers.

These workers now connect through collaborative tools such as Web conferences, video conferences and teleconferences, which can work quite well. But they lack the interactivity and freedom of movement that can be found in a 3-D environment, Forrester argues.

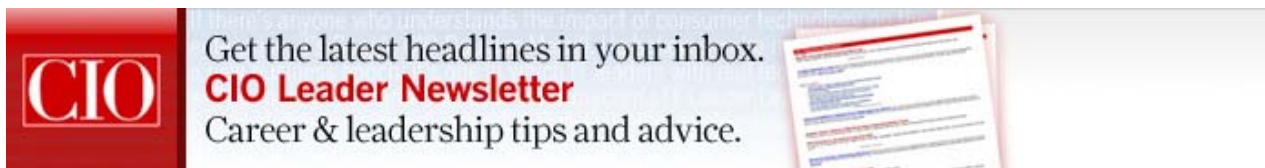
Among the reasons to start considering virtual worlds, here are a few key points and examples Forrester listed:

- **Travel is as expensive as ever.** Couple that with the need to lower your carbon footprint, and finding more viable options for distant workers to collaborate interactively (not just on a static webpage or a teleconference) becomes attractive.



- In many training environments, **purchasing complex equipment can be costly**. Such costs could be curtailed by shifting some training to virtual environments. The U.S. Army, for instance, asked a company named [Virtual Heroes](#) to create a virtual world that will allow the Army to train soldiers to handle "dangerous situations and new environments to be explored in a risk-free manner."
- **By replicating the experience of working alongside others**, brainstorming becomes more natural than it would feel during, say, a teleconference or regular chat room session on a static webpage.
- **Role playing exercises**. The [University of Maryland](#), in conjunction with the [I-95 Corridor Coalition](#), created a virtual world simulation where they can plan for emergencies by having participants role play (firefighters, emergency medical staff and police).

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