

# Virtual Worlds: New Media for Communication

Dr. Mary Ipe

*The article looks at the phenomenon of virtual worlds steadily becoming new media for communication. The onset of internet and technology has impacted every sphere of our lives. The human race becoming ever more digitalized has resulted in man's preference for virtual interaction and virtual commodities, which make up the virtual world. The virtual interface, realism and experiences have sometimes taken over human interface, actual world and material goods.*

*How do "real" people communicate in the virtual world? They take on new "avatars", interact with each other and set their own path. They inhabit within a ceaseless virtual landscape, creating a unique communication medium. The worlds appear to be far more than chat rooms taken to sophisticated levels of technology. The phenomenon gives rise to the existence of virtual or synthetic economies where people trade virtual money for virtual goods. The virtual world appears to have emerged as a medium for improving communication, extending brand presence and platforms for learning. The paper illustrates how virtual communication has been applied successfully in the areas of Education, Advertising and Learning in Business.*

Our world is becoming ever more digitalized. From media and music to advertising and dating; the 0's and 1's of digital technology have impacted almost every aspect of our society. So far the digital medium repeatedly ties back to the physical world. An individual looking for a match might use an online matrimonial website to meet someone. They do so with intent to meet and interact face to face.

However, our world is increasingly confronted with a situation when a digital medium is being used to further stamp one's existence in the same medium. People begin to appreciate online interaction, life and experiences more than that of the real world. There is preference for virtual interface, realism and goods over human interface, actual world and material goods.

A virtual world is an interactive cyber- environment accessed by a number of users who inhabit and interact as 'avatars'. These avatars represent individuals

participating online.

The term 'Virtual World' is vague and inclusive- and is also referred to as "simulated worlds" and "digital worlds". The first virtual world Habitat was created by LucasFilm Games in 1987 for Commodore 64 computer (wikipedia). This was followed by the first online 3D virtual depiction of the city of Helsinki, in 1996. The Virtual Helsinki project maps the modern and historical parts of the city. The virtual world Whyville.net, committed to the education of children was launched by Numedeon Inc. in 1999. The site design included a number of features now associated with virtual worlds as an "in world economy" and user-customized avatars.

Currently, estimates on the number of virtual worlds vary, placing them approximately at 150-plus (and growing). Table I presents the list of major virtual worlds.

**Table I: List of Virtual Worlds**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Launch Date</b>
Active Worlds	Activeworlds Inc., MA	1997
AdventureQuest (AQ)	Artix Entertainment	2002
Coke Studios	The Coca Cola Company and Studiocom, Atlanta	2002
Cybertown	Integrated Virtual Networks	1995
Disney's Toontown	Walt Disney Internet Group, CA	2003
Dreamville	Terra ICT (M) Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia	2004
Dubit	Duit Ltd., Leeds, UK	2001
Entropia Universe	MindArk	2003
EverQuest (EQ)	Developed by Verant Interactive and published by Sony Online Entertainment (SOE).	1999
Habbo Hotel	Sulake Labs	2001
Kaneva	Kaneva Inc., Atlanta	1998
Muse	Muse Communications, CA	2002
Second Life	Linden Lab, CA	2003
The Sims Online	Electronic Arts, CA	2002
There	There Inc., CA	2003
TowerChat	Voltweb Ltd., UK	2000
Traveler	The Digital Space Commons, CA	1994
Ultima Online (UO)	Origin Systems	1997
ViOS,	ViOS Inc.	2001
Virtual Ibiza	Lightmaker, UK	2002
Virtual Magic Kingdom	Disney Online, CA	2005
VPchat	Halsoft.com Incorporated, TX	2001
VZones	Stratagem Corporation, Inc., CA	1995
whyrobbierocks	Siliconmania, Utrecht, The Netherlands	2003
Whyville	Numedeon, Inc., CA	1999
World of Warcraft	Blizzard Entertainment	1994
Worlds.com	Worlds.com Inc., MA	1994
Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates	Three Rings, CA	2003

Source: [www.virtualworldsreview.com](http://www.virtualworldsreview.com)

The best known virtual worlds are perhaps Second Life, developed by Linden Labs of San Francisco, and There by Makeno Technologies of Silicon Valley. Both these virtual worlds debuted in 2003 and have around 9 million

residents or 'avatars'. Second Life in fact is universally hailed as the poster-child for virtual worlds.

#### **Interactive environment**

Virtual worlds encompass a wide range of interactive

environments, in different formats and styles. The worlds have a wide spectrum ranging from:

- “2D” or “2-11/2D” cartoon style to 3D creations

2D virtual worlds are constructed from a sequence of rooms loaded individually by each guest. In contrast, 3D worlds permit users to move continuously through a cityscape or landscape

- Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), where the visitor playing a particular character- is the main feature of the game
- Massively Multiplayer Online Real Life/Rogue-like Games (MMORLGs), where the visitor can edit and change their avatar. The user in turn plays multiple roles or a more vibrant role.

The content of the virtual worlds includes fantasy sites, familial spaces or revolutionary scientific fiction. These worlds are vibrant, immersive 3D online environments, which provide access to any users worldwide. The residents have the freedom to “do” and “be” in any form, limited only by the design of the environment. Thus some virtual worlds lay emphasis on gaming activities, while others are described as GenNext chat rooms(Bartle 2003)! The communication is mainly in the form of text, along with VOIP real-time voice contact.

### **What people do in virtual worlds?**

Visitors to a virtual world are represented visually by an image known as an ‘avatar’. They interact with each other depending on the construct of the virtual world environment. They either type text into a chat window or speak to one another through live voice chat applications (3D worlds). The visitors design their avatars, the gender, clothing and hair style, and create their own identity. They even control how their avatars move, interact, communicate and create items(Book 2004). The visitors have absolute freedom to set their own path. Their avatars can walk, fly and move about underwater or teleport themselves through cyberspace to other locations at the speed of light! Therefore avatars live within a ceaseless virtual landscape, and can take any form- human, animal or animated humanoids, depending on the disposition of the guest and the design of the environment.

Avatars, as representations of each visitor, play a crucial

role in the virtual worlds’ social structure and community formation. At the fore front, many of the activities in virtual worlds centre on the avatar–garment sales, style contests, etc. People put effort and money on virtual bodies, creating avatars dissimilar from their real self; or closer to their offline appearance. There and Second Life enable avatars to be customized, with respect to their size, shape and physical features.

### **Virtual world residents –A rapidly expanding market**

The virtual world gamers are relatively young (36 years), slightly older than gamers (33 years). The virtual world population increasingly includes females, with 40 percent of the avatars being women. They appear to be far more than chat rooms taken to sophisticated levels of technology. They are vibrant economies with concerted populations of educated consumers.

The shared space, graphical user interface and interactivity enable the residents to experience certain sensibilities(Cross)

- **The sense of self**

The user becomes his avatar while residing in the virtual world, forming a strong emotional attachment. The user creates their very identity, doing whatever they want and being whomever they want. Second Life’s caption “Your world, your imagination” captures this.

- **The prevalence of practice**

Residents share their knowledge with others and encourage an ambience of collaborative learning.

- **The enrichment of experience**

The virtual world enables guests to experience life in exciting and appealing ways. The person in real life may be confined to a wheel chair. The virtual world enables the same resident to exist in augmented reality, even looking at a battle field situation, or a virtual prototype of an aeroplane.

- **Persistent landscape**

The world exists regardless of whether individual visitors are logged in. The visitor can cut off his computer and later return with the virtual world’s existence ensured.<sup>1</sup>

- **Feeling of community and socialization**

The world promotes the creation of teams with avatars attending book releases, playing baseball-all actions promoted by their real-life creators.

### **Creation of synthetic economies**

Avatars spend hard cash in their virtual worlds. New

avatars, after subscribing, open up bank accounts and exchange real dollars for the local currency. “Lindens” in Second Life has an exchange rate of 300-\$1 and “Therebucks” in There trades at 1800-\$1.

Second Life records economic activity of over \$3.5 million weekly, where avatars spend \$1.5 billion on virtual items-pets, clothes, even real estate. When people trade virtual money for virtual goods, an economy is created.(Wu) Second Life’s well-cited first real estate

millionaire bought an island accompanied by mining rights and for the development of real estate!

Residents purchase virtual goods, which create “real value”. The residents make money by taking on the role of specific avatars who offer specialized services/goods to co-players. Table II illustrates virtual entrepreneurs-the avatars, virtual goods/services offered and medium.<sup>2</sup>

**Table II: Virtual Entrepreneurs**

Avatars	Virtual goods/services	Virtual Medium
Merchant	Magic weapons, potions or armor	Auction site: eBay
Teacher	Education -School & College level	VW: Second Life
Power Leveler	Game play	VW: World of Warcraft Auction site: eBay
Designer	Custom-designed clothes	American Apparel clothier VW: Second Life
Music composer	Coca-Cola advertisements Furnishings for music studio	Coca-Cola VW: Coke Studios
McDonalds “employee” (Food kiosk)	McDonalds virtual burgers and sundaes	McDonalds VW: Sims Online

Source: Compiled by author

The virtual world is being used as a medium for education, branding and advertising (McDonalds and Coca-Cola).

Surprisingly, the recession has not dampened sales of virtual goods. Gaia Online, a youth world with seven million monthly guests, trades above \$1 million virtual goods a month. Virtual worlds have become addictive, compelling spaces which, in turn, create a synthetic economy. The virtual currency when exchanged for the real-world dollars results in large amounts of income generated.<sup>1</sup>

Two virtual sales cited by Wikipedia bear this out.

- A virtual island worth 26,500 US dollars was sold on Project Entropia
- A virtual space station meant to be a night club was sold for an equivalent of 100,000 US dollars!

While the Virtual worlds have initially started out for gaming, entertainment and fun, they have created a phenomenal synthetic economy. Consumers spend about \$1.5 billion a year on virtual goods worldwide!

The explosion of these worlds has lead to the use of a virtual communication platform across multiple fields - education, learning in business, advertising and commercial use.

**Virtual world-New Medium for Communication Education**

Virtual worlds provide a potent medium for education, with some worlds exclusively developed for collaborative instruction. Educational worlds provide a platform to enhance and extend their reach to students who interact, use avatars to learn new assignments and create projects. They take on a wide range of forms, including computer programming tutorials, 3D recreations of museums, virtual libraries, virtual classrooms and discussion forums at school and college level.

For example, Second Life offers educational resources (SL education) and Sim Teach (SimTeach) provides links, a wikipedia and a bibliographic resource for instructors (Terdiman 2004). Linden Research which runs Second Life, sustains this activity by a campus registration. Linden Research offers an environment

for classes in town planning, business learning and game design. Aaron Delwiche, Assistant Professor, Trinity University, San Antonio, frequently assembles scholars in his "Games for the Web" course in a classroom on Second Life. While teachers and students do make use of an online environment like a chat room to meet; Delwiche holds classes where the students can fly, alter body types and create structures that can glide. The online environment enables students to adapt to outrageous avatars and interrelate in a totally different context. They see a different side of the digital media they aspire to produce in the future.

While promoting education is the focus, the underlying premise is the creation of business. SL education venture is trying to draw professors through a program to universities named Campus: Second Life. Linden Lab gives accounts for every student, as well as an acre of land for the professor and learners to work and construct on. Later, anyone inclined to stay on as a member, can do so at half-price.

### **Business Outreach and Training**

Companies use virtual worlds to create a meeting place and conduct gatherings with employees spread across the globe. These are real-life businesses that have operated in Second Life and involved themselves in the virtual environment.

IBM has created islands and erected buildings in public virtual worlds where staff can meet in various rooms to discuss projects, plan campaigns and share information. Employees relate to the meeting and the other members like they do in real in-person meetings. Sun Microsystems has created an island in Second Life devoted for the exclusive use of their employees. Employees can request help, swap novel ideas or promote a new product on the island. Dell carries out press events where reporters ask questions they would not venture in the real world. Dell makes use of employees' greater candidness online. ABN AMRO Bank has opened a virtual branch in Second Life.

In addition to public virtual worlds, companies have begun to offer private worlds that can be tailored to suit the specific needs of the firm. ProtonMedia™ has created its virtual world ProtoSphere™ with businesses in mind. <sup>2</sup>ProtoSphere is a private, business-oriented environment that offers the tools required to perform commerce and collaborate on assignments. Companies set the norms of behavior and extend their culture into the world - professionally clad avatars carrying out meetings, attending live instruction sessions and

networking with contemporaries in a virtual business setting. Virtual worlds in business offer the workforce key advantages, such as immediate communication, real-time training, connectivity and the capacity to perform and master new talents in a secure, cyber-environment. ProtonMedia's clients are using ProtoSphere for sales-force training, collaboration and improving in-house communication.

Corporations use virtual worlds as platforms for learning. IBM and Apple see the world as the engine for broad change, where training and learning is the major application. The instruction takes the form of simulations which let several learners role-play through avatars termed as "bots" to perform job skills and execute vital tasks.

### **New Realm of Advertising**

Companies like Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Levi, Nike and Toyota integrate cyber environments as a new form for advertising and branding. Fortune 500 companies, non-profit institutions and educational establishments have sponsored product positioning within virtual worlds, along with media conglomerates BBC and Reuters. Ad campaigns for real offline brands have appeared in the larger online worlds such as Habbo Hotel, There Inc., Sims Online and Second Life.

For instance, McDonalds on Sims Online offers residents food kiosks with their own "employee" who serves virtual burgers and sundaes. The kiosks contain a clickable menu with familiar McDonald items! Toyota offers virtual cars- an embedded version of the test drive for avatars. Similarly Levi's products on There Inc. are a creative way of incorporating a brand ingeniously into a virtual world. Each resident in There can participate in the promotion, thereby linking the process of identity construction with brand identity (Kidman 2007).

Several enterprises have built "solo-branded" virtual worlds for their consumers- MTV with Virtual Laguna Beach, Magic Kingdom as a recreation of the Disney theme parks and Coca-Cola with Coke Studios. Coke Studios is a world where teens can mix music in a virtual studio and win "decibel" points by playing their melodies to other players. With these points, they can procure items such as furnishings for their studio. Points are also collected by joining in games and other activities. While the gamer is on a roller coaster or replying questions, Coke's logo (red and white wave) serves as an active brand builder, adorning articles, wallpaper or environs. Coke uses a subtle approach which

the individual to interrelate with the product. (Nissim 2008)

This medium allows the consumers to browse the latest products and enables the firm to access a different clientèle and consumer demographic. They can determine consumer response and acquire feedback. Virtual Worlds Management, the trade media company had estimated the commercial investments in the “virtual worlds” sector in excess of USD 425 million in Q4 2007, and USD 184 million in Q1 2008.

### **Social Worlds- Travel and Tourism metaphors**

Popular social worlds present a more open-ended experience, less structured with a reality-based thematic setting. Travel and tourism are the most familiar social worlds that apply travel images and virtual photography to draw “online tourists”. National and cultural sites are landmarks placed within a historical continuum. They are the meeting places for new residents from the same region. Virtual worlds such as There (Giza Plateau), Active Worlds (Yellowstone Park) and Second Life (Las Vegas) present these exotic travel destinations (Book 2003). Yellow, is a world themed for Yellowstone Park, designed in conjunction with the National Parks Service. Yellow offers virtual park residents volunteering opportunities as yellow community leaders.

Virtual worlds have presented a vital platform for tourism boards, hotels and resorts to promote themselves and augment the experience of prospective tourists. Worlds like Twinity, Amazing Worlds and web maps as Google Earth proffer new opportunities to travel and tourism.

### **The Road Ahead**

While Virtual worlds have initially started out for gaming

and entertainment, they have indeed emerged as multiplayer game communication platform increasingly applied for non-gaming enterprises. Education, commerce, professional training and even medical consultation have joined on the bandwagon. Consumers spend about \$1.5 billion a year on virtual goods worldwide- creating a phenomenal synthetic economy!

A host of new worlds with a new target audience are emerging across the globe- Cyworld in Korea among under-30s and TenCent in China. Gartner Group forecasts that 80 percent of web users (plus Fortune 500 companies) will have a virtual existence by 2011. The virtual world residents will be 50-60 million by 2011. The number of virtual worlds would rise exponentially with a scenario where these worlds target the same group (CNN Money 2007). This explosion will lead to a more diverse spectrum in education, learning in business, advertising and commerce.

The onset of virtual world in India has begun with Telecom service operator Tata Teleservices (TTSL) as the first Indian telecom provider to enter the popular Second Life community (Hindu 2009). Mumbai-based Virtual World Development and Service firm, Indusgeeks Solutions Pvt. Ltd is associating with TTSL in the initiative. The ‘Follow Your Heart’ talent hunt is a platform for amateurs (photographers, artistes, performers) to showcase their talent at the Tata Indicom Island from January to March 2009. Participants can upload music, snaps and artwork on the website and experience them on the Island. TTSL believes that the virtual environment has an enormous outreach potential for business. Virtual worlds have indeed emerged as the new media for communication in the education, learning and marketing space!

### **REFERENCES**

- Bartle, R.( 2003.) *Designing Virtual Worlds*, New Riders Press,
- Book B. (April 2004 )These bodies are FREE, so get one NOW! *Advertising and Branding in Social Virtual Worlds*
- Book, B.( , 2003) Travelling through cyber space: Tourism and photography in virtual worlds. Paper presented in Conference- *Tourism and photography: Still visions- Changing lives*, Sheffield, U.K. 20-23 July.
- Cross, J., O Driscoll.T. and Trondsen, E. *Another Life: Virtual Worlds as Tools for Learning*
- Kidman, A.( 2007) Virtual Worlds, real results. July 31
- La Monica, P.R. Life beyond Second Life retrieved from CNN Money.com, June 14
- Nissim,B (2008).*Virtual Worlds:The Next Realm in Advertising?*in Ipe,M.(Ed.)Virtual Worlds , ICFAI University, .

The Hindu (2009) Tata Tele to enter into virtual world, , *Business Line* ,Jan 21,

Terdiman,D.( 2004)Campus Life comes to Second Life,Wired News retrieved from <http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/news/2004/09/65052>

Virtual-Reality-The-Playground-Is-Now-Serious-Business *Training-AND-Development* retrieved from <http://www.hrmreport.com/article/Issue-7/Training-AND-Development/Virtual-Reality-The-Playground-Is-Now-Serious-Business/>

Wu, S. *Virtual Goods: The next big business model*

[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

---

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> What is a Virtual World? Virtual Worlds Review

<sup>2</sup> Mrs Money, Virtual Entrepreneur- Business Opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs

<sup>3</sup> Edward Castronova, Associate Professor, Telecommunications, Indiana University , a leading authority in this field suggests that game developers are required to balance the synthetic economy just as real-world governments balance inflation and money supply. The parallels from the real economy such as inflation, deflation and 'mudflation' apply to the synthetic economy. The game has to balance inflation and deflation so as to maintain a stable economy.

Refer ,Tobold's MMORPG Blog: "Azeroth Economics". January 22, 2005

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hrmreport.com/article/Issue-7/Training-AND-Development/Virtual-Reality-The-Playground-Is-Now-Serious-Business>