



Life in SECOND LIFE?

Interactive online world wins business but not everyone

BY HOWARD LOVY
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Joey Silvian is CEO of the Virtual Interactive Agency in Farmington Hills, and as his company's name indicates, he's all about finding new ways to not actually be "there."

Silvian's latest "there" is an information security conference coming up in February.

Sure, there's the old-school "be-there" conference in San Francisco next month. But Silvian says he's "always ahead of the curve, trying to figure out what's a good business rationale to develop something in a new technology area."

So, what does Silvian have up his virtual sleeve?

A new website? A blog? A webinar? Old hat to Silvian.

Instead, Silvian's zeroing in on Second Life, the three-dimensional business/social interactive world.

For individuals, Second Life involves creating an "avatar," or virtual self, and walking, running – indeed, flying – around in search of games, like-minded people, titillation, escapism and stuff to buy using virtual money.

It's the latter category that has businesses excited. "Linden dollars," as they are called, can be exchanged for actual greenbacks. So, if you're a business, plunk down a couple thousand real dollars to buy an island on Second Life, open a virtual shop and you're "there."

You'd be in good company. Nissan is "there," so is Sears, as well as a handful of mom-and-pop stores that have opened up and found some success selling everything from virtual clothes for your virtual self to wear to actual products in the real world.

But, where exactly is "there"? And why? That's more complicated, and it depends on who you talk to.

If you're Silvian, who worked for Mattel Inc. in the 1980s and designed driving simulators for Jeep in the 1990s, being "there" in Second Life is his latest frontier challenge in a career spent "on



IBM and others are drawn to Second Life's "Linden dollars" and interaction.

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Expo center owners file suit

BY GARY HOFFMAN
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Members of the Adell family – owners of the building that housed the Novi Expo Center – have again sued the long-term tenant at their landmark building, claiming the special events operator has failed to maintain the building.

But attorneys for Novi Expo Center Inc., which moved from the building in August 2005 as its management prepared to open Rock Financial Showplace about a mile away, described the suit as an end-around to seize control of the property at I-96 and Novi Road.

The suit, filed Jan. 10 in Oakland Circuit Court, is the latest round in a dispute between the Adell Brothers Children's Trust and Novi Expo Center over the choice of a subtenant to fill the roughly 300,000-square-foot space and hundreds of thousands of dollars in rent concessions, court filings contend.

A main source of contention has been the year-long, \$1.2 million rent break that the events operator gave its subtenant, KWWIK Enterprises LLC, to help fill the roughly 300,000 square feet of exhibition space there. That disagreement is currently in arbitration.

Kevin Adell, a family member and president of The Word Network, a religious broadcaster in Southfield, said failure to keep the property in good repair is a monetary issue that ought to go before the court, not arbitration.

The building itself was long known as the Novi Expo Center. That also is the name of the corporation that continues to manage subleasing at the site, according to

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High energy William Museler of ITC Holdings.

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the edge of technology.”

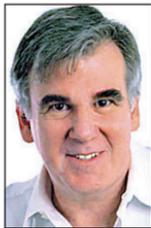
So what if Second Life is notoriously bug-ridden, slow and involves a learning curve that forces users to devote hours typing and clicking just to keep from walking or flying into walls, he says.

But Clay Shirky, an author who has studied the social and business aspects of the Internet since 1993, sees signs that Second Life is already old news to early adopters.

Unlike early versions of AOL and other eventually successful online services, Shirky says, Second Life does not seem worth it to many early adopters. If the basic experience is good, he says, people will put up with a great deal of technical hassle and find themselves rewarded once the bugs are worked out.

But the fact that the stories you read about Second Life are about companies adopting it – rather than users – says a great deal about its appeal to the masses.

Not that there’s anything wrong with the idea of top-down devel-



Silvian

opment – rather than the bottom-up phenomenon of grassroots Internet sites such as YouTube, MySpace or even blogs. But, Shirky says, Second Life is prob-

ably a case where “we have built it and they have not come.”

“What we can say now with absolute certainty is that most people who try Second Life don’t like it,” Shirky says.

Shirky is a proponent of developing what he calls “artifacts, not avatars.” Most people in a collaborative work environment do not necessarily want to see versions of themselves and their coworkers. They want to see the object of their collaboration, they want social interactions that are task-oriented. In the auto industry, for example, collaborators already have computer-aided design tools that work well for them.

Why, then, go into Second Life to reinvent the wheel?

“My guess is that the social en-



Joey Silvian of Virtual Interactive Agency sees life in Second Life’s markets.

vironments we’re going to see that actually successfully live up to the ‘news cases’ of Second Life are going to come from ‘socializing’ what it is that the existing platforms do, making a social editing space for AutoCAD or SketchUp, rather than incremental development of the Second Life tools in the direction of utility for engineers.”

But to Jack Mason, who is “chief collaboration officer” for IBM’s Business Social Network, what

critics are forgetting is that “work is a social collaboration.” Mason is in charge of IBM’s Virtual Connection Center on Second Life.

“Increasingly, work is distributed across teams that need to have ways to work together,” Mason says. “In the case of a physical product, the idea of these engineers being able to walk around, say, a very intricate model of a car component, an engine or an entire car, and to have those discussions in a

shared environment, that certainly is something that would be a richer experience than just a bunch of engineers on a conference call.”

After IBM employees get over the steep learning curve and learn to deal with the technical difficulties, Mason says, there is usually an “ah-ha” moment, when participants “have a feeling about, like, actually being there, about us being together, and usually it revolves around conversations and interchanges between people.”

And that’s what Silvian sees in services such as Second Life – where the interaction is not simply text-based, but begins to turn into something more personal – even if the environment is something as professional as an IT conference. Participants can look at products at virtual booths and drill down deep for more information. But then they also can talk to one another about what it is they’re looking at. After a while, there’s the illusion of being “there.”

■ *Howard Lovy covers technology for Oakland Business Review.*