

ComputerWeekly – World of Virtual Lessons for e-Business

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Many of us who are active on the internet, giving our views on what is happening, are used to getting “flamed” (having hostile messages about us posted online).

Just say something negative about Linux and see what gets put into Slashdot.org.

But things have got a bit scarier over the past few months, as people start confusing the virtuality of the web with the realities of life.

For example, a few months ago, a man was murdered in Japan for selling a virtual sword he had been lent during a Dungeons and Dragons-style multi-user gaming session. The original owner had reported the man for theft, but the authorities were not interested (nothing of any material value or substance had actually happened), so the guy took matters into his own hands.

In the UK, a person had their throat slashed by someone who tracked them down after statements were made about the attacker in an online chatroom. No sleuthing was required – the victim had provided their real name and address in the public profile data.

These are extreme examples, but there does seem to be more of a move to see the internet as the source of all truths, and the increasing number of unfiltered blogs and social sites provides more and more opportunities for people to take exception to things that have been said, typed or printed.

Then, we have Second Life, a complete virtual world with one million-plus (and rapidly growing) inhabitants. Second Life has its own commerce (its economy is trading about \$500,000 a day), and gives an environment for people to have a complete virtual experience in another realm.

You create your own avatar (this can be a likeness of yourself, something less frightening, or even half man/half beast), and these avatars can interact with others, chatting, carrying out business, whatever.

It is essentially unregulated. There is a set of “community standards” to stop standard excesses, but this is countered by a statement that the owners cannot be held responsible for the “quality, safety, morality, legality, truthfulness or accuracy of various aspects of the service”.

There is an explicit buyer beware clause: anything that changes hands or is bought in Second Life is a matter between the buyer and the seller – Second Life cannot become involved.

Individual users have set up shops to sell such things as clothes for your avatar to wear – and increasingly this is morphing into selling actual goods that will be delivered via the physical post. A virtual U2 bought a virtual island in Second Life and held a benefit gig there. Retail banks and large department stores are looking at whether they can set up stores. Some casinos have already appeared.

The local currency, the Linden dollar, can be earned in different ways – or bought for real US dollars (and other currencies) on LindeX, the world’s exchange system. So we are talking real commerce here – and real money from real people. But a lot of it is virtual. So if I buy something from Second Life that does not get delivered, or I feel that I have been cheated in one of its casinos or get into an argument with someone while wandering around Second Life, then flaming them just doesn’t quell the anger.

It would be a pity for such an interesting brave new world to sink rapidly into just a mirror image of the real world. As in the real world, where someone tries to make the world better by planting plants or trees and finds them vandalised the next morning, or paints things to make them look cleaner and brighter and finds graffiti covering the work within hours, Second Life runs the risk of being overrun by the dregs of humanity that wander the furthest reaches of the internet.

Is there hope? Second Life is built by people for other people. If they can get together as communities, and protest loudly when areas are set up that they do not agree with, the overall landlord (in this case, Second Life’s owner, Linden), may well close down undesirable areas.

Democracy, communities that work, a thriving commercial base, and an infrastructure for unencumbered growth with no environmental issues within its virtual walls – maybe we can all learn something from the virtual side of things.

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Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

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Quocirca's primary research involves the surveying of many thousands of technical and business end users each quarter, analyzing their perceptions of the possible impact of emerging, evolving and maturing technologies on their businesses.