

Virtual Worlds - A New Kind of Sociability

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With its mixture of text, graphics, images and videos, Internet allows users to quickly **browse** a large volume of information. But the human being is above all a social animal who needs to **experience** information in the form of live content and presence. Therefore, the Web has grown a social aspect – the Web 2.0 – enabling users to influence and customize the content. Its natural social evolution: Virtual Worlds.



New Tools for Communication

Virtual worlds are based on interactivity and communication. They allow users (called "residents") to interact in real time with other residents using multiple media - regardless of their geographical location - so as to simulate realistic environments and participate in group activities.

Typologies of Virtual Worlds

It seems undisputed that a gaming experience is a prerequisite to any Application which will later penetrate more "serious" spheres. This is without doubt a remnant of our own learning based on gaming during childhood! In the field of video games with online multi-player experiences, in addition to sharing the gaming experience players began to exchange around it via forums and other specialized sites. This has highlighted their desire to make the game's universe remain persistent beyond the game itself.

From this observation, game publishers have designed persistent online environments combining both Social and Playful aspects: *Games-Oriented Virtual Worlds* or *MMOG* (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) [Ultima Online in 1995...World of Warcraft in 2004]. In these worlds, social interactions are additional tools players can use to meet the goals of the game.



Typologies of Virtual Worlds

In parallel, other visions offered to create a persistent universe in which users could "live" virtually their social life (chat with their friends, walk in Paris, etc.). [Deuxième Monde by Canal + / Cryo in 1997, Second Life in 2003, ...].

We see now the emergence of specialized universes, called *vertical worlds*, allowing the creation of virtual communities around common themes like football, politics, etc. The big brands have quickly seized the interest of such environments to expand the exchanges with their consumers. They have begun to create their own vertical worlds called *branded worlds*, in which residents can play and interact around the brand and its universe. [Barbie World in 200, Lego World due late 2008, MTV, Coca Cola, etc].

In pursuing the dream of a possible second life, new types of worlds have emerged: the *mirror worlds*, where environments, images, content and landscapes are designed to be as close as possible to the real world. We went from "Online Pages" to "Online Places" [Google Earth, Microsoft Live Earth, Amazing Worlds,...]. This type of universe

clearly offers new opportunities in the tourism/leisure sector and exhibitions sector (conferences, tradeshow, exhibitions, etc.). No doubt they will seize these opportunities very soon.



Mirror Worlds: From Pages to Places

Whatever their type, virtual worlds gather several technologies into a single platform: audio and video streaming, webcam, text and voice chat (VOIP), physical and graphical engine, content programming (scripting), Web browser, in-world economy (Virtual Currency) and, of course, avatars – projection of a user in the world, kind of an “*augmented mouse cursor*”.

Combining these tools and the social aspects paved the way to new perspectives, new ideas that gradually mutate into new applications and uses more or less tied to the Economy.

V-Commerce, the Future of E-Commerce

Virtual worlds can create dynamic and interactive representations of real-life products to facilitate their understanding and promotion. The V-Commerce (Virtual Commerce), also introduces the sale of purely virtual goods fulfilling consumers’ desire to express their individuality - customizing their avatar and their environment -.

By exploiting all the possibilities of these universes, we can paradoxically “give life” to a product; and by skillfully combining real and virtual aspects we can imagine totally new business models.

Moreover, with the recent developments in artificial intelligence, we can now create autonomous conversational avatars who can guide users in stores and online shopping malls.



Photo-realistic Avatars

V-Learning, a New Kind of Learning

According to the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation, nearly one third of young American people go out of high school without a diploma, and virtual schools could be a more efficient way of learning/teaching.

Indeed, 3D graphics provide sensory stimuli which contribute to create a sensation of immersion that facilitates understanding and makes learning more attractive and efficient. An equation not so simple to achieve in traditional E-learning applications.

In addition to education, this combination of playful and serious exchanges gave birth to new kind of experiences called “Serious Games” and “Business Games” used for corporate training and simulations.

Streamlining Business Trips and Collaborative Work: Environmental Challenges of Tomorrow

With the environmental challenges of tomorrow, Virtual Worlds as a place to facilitate exchanges and interactions will play an important role in collaborative work. It is the good knowledge of these tools that will determine the nature and quality of exchanges and lead

companies to streamline their business trips replacing them by more eco-responsible communication channels.

The Digital Generation Democratizes These Technologies

In two reports in 2008, Institutes Gartner and Forrester indicate that virtual worlds and more generally the 3D on Internet will be generalized within the next five years. If we listen to the following Generation, which is born with these new technologies, they say they “**speak**” on MSN as if it were verbally, they “**meet**” a person while it is via a webcam. They meet their friends, visit their room and play with them ... except these friends live in another country, their room is a virtual space and video games are online!



Virtual Worlds & Collaborative Work

While we still make the difference between the virtual and reality, with the new generations these two “worlds” blend gradually and the separation is narrowing. The *digital generation* is going beyond the tools to focus on uses and applications.

Although virtual worlds require us to rethink our concept of social ties, we must tame the potential of this new form of sociability to move forward... Just the way we did when Internet arrived a dozen years ago!

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Yohan Launay & Nicolas Mas

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Authors: Yohan Launay & Nicolas Mas

Yohan Launay, Software & IT Engineer [EFREI – McGill], leads the consulting company *ConceptSL*, specialized in Internet 3D and Virtual Worlds. Since 2006, with his partner **Nicolas Mas**, System Engineer [EFREI], they study, dissect and combine these new technologies to support companies in their strategy for innovation.

To contact us:

- Yohan.Launay@ConceptSL.com
- Nicolas.Mas@ConceptSL.com
- <http://www.ConceptSL.com>

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