

CDC Enters Second Life

9/18/2006

What game has 700,000 players, an economy larger than some countries, and offers CDC a seat at the “game table?” The answer would be “metaverse”—a word that for many still draws blank looks and, from others, hails objections that it would even be described as a game.

Before high-speed Internet came onto the scene, there were much simpler games where players could match their wits—think checkers, dominoes, and jacks. Later, more complex games like Risk, Aggravation, and Dungeons and Dragons employed a bit of imagination and social role-playing, but only so many people could play and where they could play was usually limited to a distance not to exceed the living room.

Massively Multi-player . . . What?

Gamers of today have stepped beyond the confines of their four walls—sometimes without leaving the house. The creation of Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) has expanded their reach to homes, coffee shops, and offices around the world. MMORPGs allow thousands of gamers to simultaneously interact in such virtual worlds as interstellar colonies and medieval fantasy cultures.

Dubbed a metaverse, this form of play constitutes a complete experience in and of itself, yet it’s linked to the real world through connections formed between persons, commerce, and shared interests. Unlike traditional board games, whose main objectives are that someone should come out a winner, locate the treasure, or attack and apprehend the bad guys, the present state of virtual gaming has taken on an other-worldly context and address. It’s not uncommon for participants to interact socially and exchange ideas, information, and real money to enhance online play.

Joining a metaverse is simple. All that’s needed is a personal computer with a good graphics card and a broadband connection, find a virtual world of interest, and sign up. From there, members create an avatar (an animated character that can be characterized to look exactly like the real-world person), and then begin exploring the environment and interacting with other “residents.”

So What Does This Have to Do With CDC?

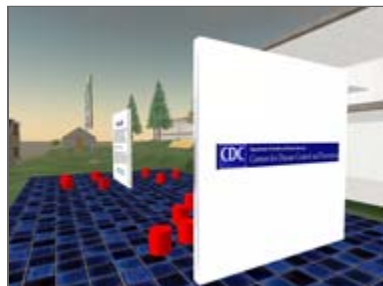
In August 2006, CDC set up its first test site in Second Life, a cyber community with over 700,000 members. After choosing an avatar and promptly naming her Hygeia Philo, meaning “lover of health,” CDC



John Anderton, PhD, initiator of the CDC world, sees it as an opportunity to learn and teach. Every virtual person represents a real person. *Photo by Kathy Nellis*



See old CDC health posters and a variety of public health messages as you journey through Second Life.



The “virtual CDC” will offer health information to residents of Second Life as part of their online play. To provide

acquired its first plot of “land.” Following the purchase, the CDC “inworld” address was listed in the Second Life Yellow Pages directory, and a billboard set up to announce the arrival of CDC.

The “virtual CDC” will offer health information to residents of Second Life as part of their online play. To provide real-time information on a variety of health topics, the virtual CDC world is linked to www.cdc.gov, and all that it provides—in the real world.

John Anderton, PhD, initiator of the CDC presence in Second Life, sees it as an opportunity to learn and teach, since every virtual person represents a real person. “Online metrics will be able to describe not only the types of information that persons are seeking, but how long they spent reading it, and what information is subsequently sought. Instead of a snapshot of an interaction between a member of the public and a particular database used, we can develop a more complex portrait of how people seek and find CDC information, as well as what is important to them.

“This, in turn, should be able to help us refine what we offer through CDC websites, and in response to public inquiries.” But, in addition to thorough evaluation, Anderton concedes, “It’s fun, too!”

Second Lifers Meet to Discuss Real Business

At the Second Life Community Conference, held in San Francisco and attended by Anderton, he said the core principle of Second Life gamers was “don’t just sell me something—play with me!”

“CDC can provide access to voluminous amounts of information, and can package it in ways that this unique audience segment can find attractive and interesting,” says Anderton.

Donna Garland, director of the Office of Enterprise Communication agrees. “Advancing public health means going where the people are. In this case, if there are thousands of persons spending significant amounts of time online, where better to influence their health-related decision making? CDC messages of all kinds can be placed in this space for persons to see passively, or to engage and answer questions from those actively interested in improving their own health. Doesn’t hurt that it’s in an environment of their own choosing,” she says.

2nd Lifers are Typically . . .

When asked to describe the average resident of Second Life, Anderton

real-time information on a variety of health topics, the virtual CDC world is linked to www.cdc.gov and all that it provides – in the real world.



In August 2006, CDC set up its first test site in Second Life, a cyber community with over 700,000 members. After choosing an avatar and promptly naming her Hygeia Philo, CDC acquired its first plot of “land.” Following the purchase, the CDC “inworld” address was listed in the Yellow Pages directory, and a billboard set up to announce the arrival of CDC.



“CDC can provide access to voluminous amounts of information, and can package it in ways that this unique audience segment can find attractive and interesting,” says Anderton, as he fine tunes the system.

cited the statistics, “The median age of a resident is 36, the mean age is 32. Forty-five percent of gamers are women, so the stereotype of a teen male game player is pretty much shot—this is a new information channel and a new target demographic, savvy to multiple communication technologies and highly selective in how they wish to receive information. If we want to offer people our data and, if this is where some segments are, then public health should be there too.”

There are several virtual worlds—everQuest, CyWorld, There, and Second Life, to name a few. Second Life, in particular, has grown rapidly since the 15,000 enrolled players reported at the end of 2003. At any one point, 5,000 to 8,000 persons are playing simultaneously in this sphere—at the same time, spending a collective total of 150,000 hours per day online and approximately \$500,000 buying and selling clothes, homes, art, furniture, and many other things to enhance the gaming experience.



CDC was featured in the [Metaverse Messenger](#), an online newspaper dedicated to publishing news on Second Life and other virtual worlds.

Testing the Market

Real-world marketing is in the baby stages of entry into this domain, with retail clothing chain American Apparel, Wells Fargo bank, NASA, and NOAA setting up presences in Second Life. The American Cancer Society has, since 2005, run their Relay for Life fundraiser within the Second Life program, earning approximately \$6,000 in donations, in 2005, and over \$41,000, in 2006. Amazon already sells books there, and Duran Duran is preparing for their first simulcast concert to be broadcast into real life, from Second Life, this fall.

While virtual worlds sound like a lot of fun and the perfect place for networking, the fun can sometimes come at a price not just measured in time or dollars. Purely text-generated social interaction online (for example, chat rooms) has led to personal connections in the real world. MMORPGs and virtual worlds add dimensionality to the chat experience, where one can actually see the fantasy character they're chatting with, albeit one who may present him or herself in an idealized state.

Anderton recommends caution to anyone interested in blending their virtual worlds with their real-world lives. “Sex-related content and violence are common aspects present in online spaces. Online play is not just about simple fun and diversion—it can lead to real-world economic, social, physical, and psychological consequences, both positive and negative.”

“On the horizon for CDC,” says Anderton, “are evaluation, expansion, and evolution. Thorough evaluation will be followed by expanded offerings, such as adding the American Public Health Association exhibit to the CDC site, and other CDC program-driven content. As Second Life evolves, CDC content will also need to adapt to meet new and changing audience needs, just like it does out here in the real world.”

CDC Featured in Virtual Newspaper of 2nd Life Metaverse

CDC was featured this week in the [Metaverse Messenger](#), an online newspaper dedicated to publishing news on

Second Life and other virtual worlds.

Gamers already enrolled in [Second Life](#) can use the search window to find the new CDC location.

For more information about CDC's virtual world, contact [John Anderton](#).

This ***Inside Story*** by John Anderton and Yolanda Barnes