



Agencies getting serious about virtual worlds

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The National Defense University is building a 600-seat auditorium above an island in a virtual world. Ten days ago, the Air Force put out a call to gauge companies' interest in prototyping a virtual base. The Transportation Department has constructed a synthetic world with IBM. Last year, the State Department held an eight-hour jazz fest for 300 avatars and chatted in Second Life with 20 others from Canada and Poland about student visas.

It's time to start getting real about the virtual work world.

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In less than nine months, the Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds has grown from a handful of agencies to more than 100. The group's second conference, held April 24 and 25 in Washington, captured the interest of new companies, as well.

Lockheed Martin Corp. and employee recruitment giant tmp.worldwide were sponsors, as were private world maker Forterra Inc. and the Second Life branding firm, The SL Agency. SRA International had a booth and BAE Systems had a speaker, as did trailblazer IBM and Engineering and Computer Simulations of Orlando, Fla., which is constructing a virtual environment for the Army National Guard.

While the first consortium conference last December had the look and feel of the early meetings of the President Clinton-era reinvention revolutionaries, this one, like virtual worlds themselves, had matured. Avid participants included an Air Force general, an Army National Guard colonel and Robert Childs, senior director of NDU's Information Resources Management College.

Vaunted management consultancy McKinsey & Co. recently produced a 150-page report warning companies not to ignore virtual worlds because they are on the cusp of a huge expansion. The report follows similar assessments from Gartner and Forrester, which are other leading advisers of the information technology industry.

The messages have not been lost on agencies, especially Defense, where lightweight mobile and widely accessible video gaming software is replacing costly, embedded, immobile simulations as the quick-and-dirty training tool of choice.

America's Air Force

The Air Force is looking for contractors to help it launch a virtual world for training and recruiting. Maj. Gen. Erwin Lessel told the conference crowd on April 24. If the plan takes off, pilots and airmen will follow the trail blazed by the hugely successful America's Army online recruiting game and the training modules built out of it.

The Air Force Education Command issued a [presolicitation notice](#) on April 15 seeking input on a prototype "always-on" 3-Denvironment where airman can take two cyberspace courses, one via avatars and the other via real-time live audio and video feeds. Responses are due May 15 and the Air Force expects to issue a contract by September, Lessel said.

MyBase, as the Air Force world is called, was the result of a white paper titled "[On Learning: The Future of Air Force Education and Training](#)," released in January, which proposed changes aimed at better attracting and teaching millennials, young people born between 1980 and 2001, who are more fluent with digital information, online gaming and Web 2.0 than the generations that preceded them.

Buying In

As virtual world fluency becomes a salable attribute in the federal market, contractors are flaunting it if they have it and supporting it with acquisitions. For example, Lockheed's new Virtual Worlds Labs outfit was on display at the conference. Last August, the behemoth firm bought [3Dsolve](#), a respected serious games company in Cary, N.C.

3Dsolve has worked on developing America's Army and a number of other immersive military training programs. It's been named to the Top 100 technology companies four times by *Military Training Technology* magazine.

Of course, virtual efforts aren't new to Lockheed, a leader in military modeling and simulation, but 3Dsolve forms the core of the virtual worlds labs, the company's united front to win new customers in this space.

Meanwhile, Forterra, continues making inroads with its private synthetic environments. In January the company's online interactive virtual environment's software received top technology honors from *IEEE Spectrum* magazine. The conference was abuzz with talk that Forterra might be the first synthetic world company to get certified for government use.

Culture Clash

Whenever a new product or service enters the federal market, its purveyors at first are dismayed and bewildered by the procurement process. Virtual world companies are no different. It's no surprise that companies like Forterra and ECS, which have focused on military customers and hired

experienced military modeling and simulation experts, are doing best.

Second Life? Well, not so much. For example, when Paulette Robinson, assistant dean for teaching at the Information Resource Management College, sent Second Life a purchase order to buy four islands last year, the company simply refused to process it. The boilerplate federal acquisition regulation language was too convoluted, and Second Life didn't have anyone who could parse it.

The fiscal year ended, and with it, the funding, so this year Robinson used her federal credit card to buy a single island to get started on the college's virtual presence. The government center is under construction, but developer Net 2 Net Solutions in Great Falls, Va., is building the large auditorium above the first island until the college can buy the other three needed to house the large building.

It seems that the second attempt to purchase the islands had to be opened to bidders for 10 days because there's more than one source for Second Life islands.

SNAFUs

Exploring Second Life, with its cavorting avatars, lax behavioral code and unpredictability has plenty of pitfalls for federal folks. It's nearly impossible for those whose Web addresses end in .mil to enter. Defense agencies are banned from visiting MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Second Life and their ilk from work, and their network security guardians make few, if any, exceptions.

The Air Force training command created a .edu domain to get around the proscription, as did, reportedly, the Defense Acquisition University. IRMC set up an enclave of computers disconnected from the NDU network where researchers can go to investigate virtual worlds. As Robinson pointed out, entering a virtual environment isn't tremendously expensive, but building there is. IRMC paid its developers \$50,000. So Robinson and others are pushing for a federal virtual objects repository where agencies could go to reuse buildings, vehicles, furniture and other items already bought and paid for.

The General Services Administration, home of that vast catalog of real-world goods and services known as the Federal Supply Schedules, apparently is ready to help. Terry Weaver, director of GSA's information technology accessibility and workforce division, told conferees that her agency already has created a virtual warehouse.

Also on the list of hurdles to overcome:

- Little or no funding;
- Lack of interoperability among virtual environments (the Navy wants to be able to launch a missile in one world and hit a target in another);
- Government computers, purchased for low-demand office work, don't have the requirements that virtual worlds require for streaming video;
- Federal employees can't download the large software applications required to enter immersive environments;
- Commercial worlds present security risks, but closed worlds prevent interaction among agencies and with the public;
- Agency decision makers don't understand virtual worlds and don't see what needs they address.