



Building The Feds' Virtual War Room

Andy Greenberg, 20 March 2008

Leave it to the U.S. government to suck the fun out of innovative technology. As the inhabitants of virtual worlds like "Second Life" and "World of Warcraft" fulfill fantasies of flying between islands and fighting armies of blood elves, the feds are looking into using the virtual realm for far more mundane--if more practical--activities: sitting around a conference table, watching PowerPoint presentations and attempting to track down terrorists.

On Thursday, San Mateo, Calif.-based start-up Forterra Systems and IBM revealed some details of a "Second-Life"-style virtual world the two companies have been developing for the U.S. government. The project has been commissioned by In-Q-Tel, a national-security-focused technology investment company funded by U.S. intelligence agencies, and has the mission of using virtual environments to let uncommunicative U.S. intelligence agencies interact with each other more efficiently and with more trust.

Unlike the expansive microcosms of Linden Lab's "Second Life" or Vivendi's "World of Warcraft," In-Q-Tel's digital environment will likely be a single room, designed to function as a virtual meeting place for U.S. intelligence agencies, according to a Forterra spokesman. In theory, government agents who are scattered geographically will be able to log on and meet "face to face" as realistic avatars in a digital conference room equipped with video and audio conferencing, presentation applications, and file sharing, all provided by IBM's unified communications software.

Many details of the project are still hazy. In-Q-Tel wouldn't reveal which, if any, of the U.S.'s 16 intelligence agencies had expressed interest in assembling the virtual world or how much the project would cost. In general, In-Q-Tel funds projects that have both private sector and government applications. But according to Forterra spokesman Chris Badger, about half of the 16 agencies had directly expressed interest in the virtual environment project.

"Think of it as a digital war room," says Badger. He describes a scenario in which a team from several agencies meets in the virtual space to monitor maps of agents' locations on the ground in Afghanistan in real time, communicating both with each other by teleconference and video feeds in the virtual room and simultaneously with the ground agents via mobile devices.

Part of the goal, Badger says, is to create a sense that officials from different agencies who have never met can have personal interactions in cyberspace. But don't expect real-life spies to don, say, penguin suits or wings, as avatars do in "Second Life." Instead, agents' avatars will look much like their real-world selves and be identified by their names and areas of expertise. To verify those identities--a critical point in securing classified conversations--they'll join the world through the same authentication process they use to log on to their government networks.

Donald Tighe, an In-Q-Tel spokesman, wouldn't confirm whether the project was ultimately planned for government or private sector use, but he hinted that a simple conference room may be just the beginning. Future projects with Forterra, he said, could include virtual simulations of intelligence missions in reproduced physical locations.

For other clients, Forterra has already begun to experiment with more complex simulations. Since launching about a year ago, the company has partnered with the University of Maryland to simulate emergency responses to traffic accidents, and the U.S. Army has begun using its

software to train soldiers in responding to improvised explosive devices, a common threat in Iraq.

"Every explosion that happens in a virtual world is a good thing," says Forterra's Chris Badger. "Every time a soldier is 'injured' in a simulation, they learn more about how to stay safe in reality."

Compared with those action-packed scenarios, a group of intelligence agents meeting in a virtual conference room seems rather tame, says Gartner Research's Carol Rozwell, an analyst focused on the use of virtual worlds in business. "If you're just sitting in a virtual world and watching a Web presentation, you're wasting your money," Rozwell says.

Still, she sees projects like In-Q-Tel's as confirmation that virtual worlds have value for serious organizations. Despite "Second Life's" waning popularity as a destination for businesses--partly a result of virtual vandalism and other unpredictable behavior by the world's more eccentric inhabitants--she insists that private virtual worlds like Forterra's can offer many of the same advantages without the risks to security and productivity.

"The level of interaction that comes about with natural-looking avatars--it can really draw you in," Rozwell says. "With a richer quality of conversation, thoughts and opinions come out in a way that they never would in another environment, especially when people have never worked together before, and the benefits can be tremendous."

And for federal agents hoping to try on a virtual bunny suit or swing a battle ax? Sadly, they'll have to wait for the weekend.