

Forterra the 10 Year Old Start Up Provides Secure 3D Collaboration, Learning & Marketing Solutions

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Forterra Systems, Inc. is a 3D immersive environment for meeting collaboration and marketing but started about 10 years ago as There.com. There.com was one of the first social virtual worlds (teenagers) before Second Life. About 4 years ago, management saw they had a great opportunity for more serious, business uses of the technology so they split into two parts and Forterra Systems was created to go after the business usage of the technology.

They launched their Olive products about 2 years ago as a software development kit for the 3D environment. Inherently it's been a virtual world software platform, really focused mostly on how people can craft collaboration and training applications. But, underneath collaboration, the core solutions that they focus on are meetings, events, and product launches.

"We've been very much focused on how we craft more of a complete solution," noted Chris Badger, Vice President of Marketing for Forterra Systems. "Like a lot of virtual worlds out there, there's sort of a need to get a critical mass of not only features, but having the experience and seeing the effectiveness so that you can really get customers deploying across the enterprise."

Though Forterra focuses mostly on enterprises, they are also tackling the small/medium business market too. "The heart of what we have been going after is, in fact, helping companies deploy this behind their firewall or through a firewall. So, as a result, a good chunk of our focus has also dealt with what I'm going to call IT-ready issues. How do you work with the business PCs that a typical business has? They're typically 2 to 4 years old. They weren't purchased to run a graphics oriented application like a virtual world. So, therefore, you've got to design towards that. You've got to run in the networks that run behind the firewall and you have to run through firewalls and integrate employee authentication systems."

Forterra has partnerships with people like IBM and Accenture, and a large-scale ecosystem of partners that get them into all sorts of discrete industries. They work with partners who have account and subject matter expertise that can utilize their technology.

"We have a partner in the therapy vertical and, well, you've got to understand how therapists would use this and apply their craft in a virtual world to get an effective solution. So, we love working with partners, because we are fundamentally just a software company. We need partners that have the knowledge to apply the technology to craft a complete solution."

"We think we lead the market in terms of really the fidelity and the immersive experience in the 3D environment. What I'm getting at is that the broadest strokes, whether its audio conferencing, 2D platforms, web conferencing, virtual worlds or things like telepresence and video conferencing, all of those technologies try to come close to recreating what we have in a live, face-to-face meetings."

"Now, obviously audio conferencing is the cheapest and it is the furthest away from that, but fundamentally, I think that what we're looking for, technology solutions that make us feel like we can have the equivalent of a live, face-to-face meeting. So, we've worked very hard in our platform to achieve that level of experience."

So, that's a key part of where Forterra spends a lot of time designing—fidelity of the immersive experience combined with the need for complete media sharing. For example, giving the ability for any attendee to be able to drag and drop a PowerPoint, video or any desktop application in a meeting. "Those are strengths we've had historically. We're just making it so that any marketing person, any user can very quickly leverage the media they use on a daily basis. But, the attendees see it show up in a screen just like they do at a physical event. So we want the hot videos to really pop inside a screen in a really cool in an auditorium and we can do things like turn down the lights and use laser pointers to really highlight stuff... they can be pretty dramatic when you do that in a 3D environment."

Forterra thinks that's one of the major points about why 3D environments can make a lot of sense. Of course people don't have to travel—but you could still meet via video or audio conference and not travel. With a rich 3D environment, you have multiple modes of interacting with attendees. You're not just presenting, you can demonstrate and simulate and move into separate breakout sessions while staying in the environment by simply walking into the next meeting room.

"When you get into things like breakout discussions, you can't do that with a web conferencing environment today. You can't have a group of 20 people break into four groups of five, each brainstorming in a separate session, raising ideas and then bringing them back. So, that's one of the inherent beauties and you can't do that in a video conferencing environment either."

In a 3D environment, you can have whatever facilities make sense and attendees have ways of interacting with each other to really replicate what you do in real life.

"A lot of our customers really proved that out last year. We've done a couple of studies with these customers that show the effectiveness and they've been really positive. But, we're right at that cusp or that proverbial inflection point in the industry where the features and the experience are good enough where people see that, it's not us just saying it, customers have to say it."

3D environments have had the reputation of being on the expensive side and to keep the costs down, Forterra has been pre-packaging a lot of the 3D art into 'content packs.' They're meant to be industry or application specific packs of 3D technology or content so that customers don't have to create things from scratch. Costs are getting down into the hundred thousand dollar if not, below 100 thousand dollar range for private, secure, full-featured environments. "So, we have packages that can roll out for 30 thousand dollars, but it's going to be limited in its scope and deployment. And like anything else, it is going to depend on the overall scope."

"Clients don't have to go out and create 3D content, or hire people to do it for them if they don't have the skill set in house. Forterra provides out of the box, solutions so that you can begin to hold virtual meetings right away. "We have a whole meeting content pack with about 40 different rooms for scenarios you can meet in. It ranges from an auditorium to board rooms. We've got a whole mansion that you can use for an offsite."

"So, the intent is that out of the box, people can immediately start meeting. They're all configured with things like screens and chairs and tables and so you don't have to take a lot of time to develop, you can actually use the virtual environment right out of the box. So, that's really helping to bring down the cost. I'm talking about the total cost, not just the licensing of our platform, but really what it takes to craft the complete solution and then deploy it."

The same goes for avatars; they can provide a selection of avatars (that are really pretty human-like) to choose from or with a digital picture, create one that is a replica of the meeting attendee.

"We do things like personalized avatars. We can take one digital photograph and very quickly create a head that looks 90% like the photo. And all of our avatars have their chest breath, eyes blink and we've got a variety of built in animations so that when I'm talking, my lips are synchronized with my spoken word. These are subtle things that we think really help people feel like when they come into a virtual meeting, it really feels like we are meeting together. People trust that."