Cobbling together a case for metaverse as social change tool...

Can a virtual world change the real one? Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard Law School's Berkman Center has an extensive post stemming from a short presentation I gave the summary of a Roadmap breakout session, where a group of geekishly inclined media folks described our vision for the state of online worlds in 2016. Working with their notes and some of my mine, we envisioned a future where metaverse was the new operating system, an equal contributor to popular culture, an integral element in the world economy, and so entirely woven into the Internet that it would depict everything we knew about the physical world as a topographic interactive 3D data. This last point was perhaps the most optimistic, because argued, the metaverse would create total transparency across the globe and be informed on the health of the planet and its peoples. There was a virtual Cam Darfur in Second Life now, I mentioned by example; it’s primarily a resource to raise awareness of the ongoing genocide in Sudan. Ten years from now, I suggested places like that could easily incorporate real world data in real time.

Ethan (brilliant in a brusque-but-avuncular sort of way) took great exception to last point. Or in his words, “I lost it.”

Later on, in a post that’s both thoughtful and gracefully forceful, he explains
strength of his reaction:

The reason Second Life bugs me is not the fact that it slows my computer to a crawl, that most of my fellow characters are impossibly thin girls with overinflated breasts, or that most of the activity of the world seems to rotate around real estate and sex. (It reminds me of Reagan’s America, without the cocaine.) No, the cyberutopianism.

I love the Reagan line, but considering the popularity of virtual magic mushrooms and artificial life pot plants, not to mention the hot tubs or rampant free love say Second Life usually seems more like Jerry Brown’s California. But that’s just the strength of his reaction:

But his point about cyberutopianism is well-taken, especially coming as it does from a man who’s been to real life refugee camps in Africa (he told me later), and a human rights activist who’s been exasperated at the difficulty to get any first-hand data on Darfur-- let alone create an accurate simulation of a camp inside it. (The record, when I made this point, I was thinking of how satellite imagery of Darfur’s razed villages could be depicted in the metaverse, even when first-hand reporting was not possible, but it’s my fault for not spelling that out.) In any case, Ethan’s point wasn’t to denigrate the effort that went into creating SL’s Camp Darfur, or the superheroes who now protect it against griefers-- it’s to wonder how important such an installation is in the hierarchy of the here and now, against ongoing genocide:

The web, now twelve years old, will help draw attention to people affected by these situations, improve reporting and give us voices from people on the ground, though we’ll still need professional journalists, real-world NGOs and, possibly, military forces to intervene in situations like Darfur. It’s not that the metaverse doesn’t matter. It’s just not a very high priority yet.

And that point is well-taken, too, though it does make you wonder what role those who aren’t in an NGO or the Marine Expeditionary Force can play. (Beyond contacting their Congresspeople and the media, and seeking other traditional avenues of redress.) Still, I agree that the metaverse as a tool for social change is a ways on the priority list-- perhaps on par with starting a website that promotes genocide awareness. (Even if Camp Darfur attracted just five visits every hour, it’d be on a parity with most political blogs, which are lucky to attract over a thousand unique visitors per week.)

But while it’s surely not a high priority, I do want to make the case that virtual worlds like Second Life should at least be seen as a medium priority for effect social and political progress-- certainly in the next few years. A couple rough in-development arguments for that after the break.
THE YEAR IN NWN:
MARVELS, WONDERS, AND
FANTASTIC DEVICES
THE YEAR IN NWN:
CREATING CONFLICT
ALL SIMS CONSIDERED
ARCHIVES

The New World Notes
Travel Guide (A personal
selection of great sites in
SL)
SL Machinima (Index of
links)
Gaming the System (Index
of SL game development
links)
Social Structures, Social
Upheaval (Index of links)
Sex and Romance (Index of
links)
The Uncanny Valley Expo
(All the entries)
New World Group Directory
The Trouble with Two
Million (Tateru Nino counts
the cost of reaching that
number of accounts)
Copying a Controversy (A 3D
Napster creates a brief
mini-IP firestorm)
Not the First Time (Culture
clashing with corporate co-
option)
Outsourcing the Metaverse
(From Saigon to SL)
Need 4 Nissan? (How a
young car lover beat an
automotive conglomerate in
Second Life)

Second Life as Immersive Blogging: At the moment, the SL user base of 215,
approaches the popularity of top political blogs; by the end of this year, it'll b
close to half a million users. Of course, unlike a blog, most Residents aren't c
in-world to engage in politics. But the unique user-creation tools of SL make
of 3D blogging possible-- quickly responding to the day's events with images, a
video, and builds, in a way that can be experienced by other Residents in
the space. We saw this perhaps most vividly during the Katrina disaster last year,
Residents shared photographs from New Orleans and other ravaged areas, and
created memorial candles for the victims, some of whom were SL members di
hit by the storm. I call this "immersive blogging", borrowing the first term fror
world of VR research and game development, to capture the quality of being
surrounded by experience in a way that shifts the experience from passive wa
to embodied participant. I'm not an academic, and the folks at Stanford's Virt
Human Interaction Lab are the ones to best speak on the phenomenon, but as
reporter and a participant myself, it's my sense that this shifting effect is gen
See yourself as an avatar, see the graphical 3D world around you as a true spa
and see the people you're interacting with as people you know, and can have
moral emotional investment in. Which leads to my second argument:

Embodied Interaction becomes Active Engagement: Unlike blogging and ot
Net-based interaction, the quality of a virtual world "punctures the fourth wal
removing the barrier between medium and participant, and translates into a
willingness to engage that mediums before it do not usually encourage. Again
not an academic, so this is my inference based on anecdote. I saw this pheno
during Katrina, when Residents who didn't know them personally before took
gris and made significant sacrifices to help the storm's refugees. More recen
course, I reported on how roleplaying heroes quickly morphed into somethin
real thing, in the effort to protect Camp Darfur. As Ethan says in his post
lot easier to guard a virtual refugee camp, than shield the real camps. But I t
that misses another point: where there were once gamers, there are now nas
activists, struggling to do something, anything, on an issue that many hadn't
previously given much thought.
These cases are small and not necessarily typical, but they're the kind of things that make me think that something like a lever to move the civic-minded is developing here. My guess (and hope) is we'll see more of the phenomenon as the world expands, and as it expands, so too the glimmer of an influence on the real world. Will it be enough to end genocide? Certainly not now or any time soon. But it already been enough to improve international relations on a micro level. And it happens, there's an even better test case coming next month-- a Los Angeles political candidate is gambling that his virtual campaign headquarters in SL will win him a seat on the City Council.

In any case, I hope to see Ethan at next year's Metaverse Roadmap, so we can compare notes. Maybe I'll be less optimistic. Or maybe he'll think SL's less lik Reagan's America.

Ethan's post is here-- read it all, and be sure to catch the comments section as well.

Zero Grace has some thoughts on this conversation, too.

Friday, May 12, 2006 in Education in SL, Real world in SL, Research and academia

TrackBack

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Listed below are links to weblogs that reference RETURN TO DARFUR:

» Virtual Darfur: Civic Engagement or Fake Activism? from The Click Heard Roh the World
There has been an interesting debate going on between Ethan Zuckerman of C Voices and Hamlet at New World Notes. It’s a discussion centered around the Life virtual Darfur Camp built by several activists to highlight the plight of [Read More]

Tracked on Saturday, May 13, 2006 at 10:00 PM

» Nonprofits and Second Life and Other Games from Beth's Blog
Susan Tenby from TechSoup demos the virtual TechSoup Office during the Netsquared Conference while Ruby Sinreich and Deborah Finn (Cyber-Yenta) blog about it. (Blogger Wagner James Au who reports on Second Life is seated next Susan.) The TechSoup... [Read More]

Tracked on Monday, June 19, 2006 at 11:50 AM
Now I've read (much of) Zuckerman's comments and your article, and so offer relevant comments myself, Hamlet.

And, sure, you are --- and always have been --- all boosterish regarding SL. (Neither's anything wrong with that, and not that it doesn't also provide evidence your intergrity, since you're no less gung-ho now than you were when you wor the Lindens.)

And Zuckerman's also right about the basic need being to get the raw RL info OUT of Darfur (or sadly similar situations) in the first place.

But of course: How else to know to take necessary action?

But your point about the effectiveness of SL's 3-D immersion in providing an emotional, almost tangible connection with what's going on in remote (to so many sections of the world ... your point is well-made and well-taken.

The experts and authorities, sure, their focus will be the raw data. But if gen public response and support has ANY worth at all, then it will become imperative the 3-D, avatar-inhabited metaverse expands beyond its present, admittedly rarified, community) ... it will become imperative to present the data within SL-ish environment.

Because, yes, goddamnit: "The quality of a virtual world punctures the fourth removing the barrier between medium and participant, and translates into a willingness to engage that mediums before it do not usually encourage."

You carefully refer to that (quoted above) as anecdotal evidence. But how m much anecdotal evidence is necessary (I concur, my friends concur, everyone I know has stayed in SL for more than a few months concurs) before ... well, not before accepted as fact. (Because, hell, then religion would be equal to science and may as well give up and just kiss the feet of the whole Intelligent Design crevicts.)

But how many people need to experience "Active Enagagement via Embodied
Interaction” before it's a viable, significant force?

When it comes to public awareness/action, it's all just a numbers game, isn't it so much in this world.

*sigh*

But I think you're right that the 3-D immersive metaverse would INCREASE the numbers beyond whatever amount might be reached otherwise. That's not "ut thinking," that's simply a fact.

(Although, yeah, I'm a mite cheerleaderish about SL, myself. Guilty as charged)

So.

Just my somewhat errant thoughts on this complex topic, Hammie ...

Keep up the good work!

^_^

Posted by: Memory Harker | Friday, May 12, 2006 at 11:25 AM

I'm reading this and nodding my head all the way through.

I'm really excited about the way the internet and online communing is developing and evolving.

I can see some amazing shifts and changes in the world over the next 50 years Driven by the transparency of the internet. The less walls it has and the more to pool our knowledge and interact with each other, regardless of where we are who the more benefit will be derived from it.

It's exciting, I can't wait to see what unfolds...

It's an incredibly exciting time and I feel that things have yet to truly take off

Posted by: plark | Friday, May 12, 2006 at 01:16 PM

Hamlet, thank you for helping us illuminate the process behind Camp Darfur. The timing had been better on the Metaverse Roadmap Summit.

As an educator and media producer I've been handed a very unique challenge; design experiences that motivate people to take action on an issue that we'd forget about. It sucks being the one who tells kids what genocide is! Camp Darfur SL is one piece of that story, an idealized displacement camp where everyone
To the Stars (RL rocket scientists create an island of their own)

Hooray for Bollywood (The India-fication of avatar beauty)

God Game (Creating an artificial ecosystem)

Bullet in the Head (Or, avatar-based Russian Roulette)

Quarter Million, Plus Change (Debating the significance of 250K+ Residents)

Virtual Meet-Up (Campaigning for office in an online world)

Going Pro in SL (Aimee Weber’s advice for paying bills with virtual world skills)

My-Avatar- Heritage.com (Matching online persona to real world celebrity)

The Uncanny X-Men (and NewsCorp) Come to Second Life

The Art of Tech War (Creating an RTS in SL)

Heart of Tateru (The Asperger’s advantage)

Guarding Darfur (When superheroes meet genocide)

Return to Darfur (Debating role of virtual worlds as social change tool with Ethan Zuckerman)

Guarding Darfur (When superheroes meet genocide)

protected by superheroes and has the food and care they need to survive. A home where people can rebuild.

We live on Better World Island because we believe that we need good examples to follow. We look for positive uplift and the best new solutions from around the world. Our scouts are from five continents...they are accountants, artists, inventors, actors. Some have laid their lives on the line to protect the people of Darfur and others in their care. Some are in Africa now building an orphanage, others are planning large humanitarian efforts for later this year.

At the RL Camp Darfur in Los Angeles we took potatoes and made skull stamps: Students came by and dipped the potatoes in the paint ten times, each stamp representing 100 lives. By the end of that day 400 students memorialized 10,000 people lost in Darfur. By the end of those five minutes those kids understood the scale of tragedy that they had not comprehended before.

I haven’t figured out how to make these kind of experiences real in Camp Darfur yet….the videos walls are coming online next week and the Camp Darfur Committee tries to bridge the education gap for kids....but it’s a meager start. We’re two months in now. I’m so thankful we’ve had the support of the Green Lanterns and others who have been getting involved in SL and through RL advocacy in every corner of the globe.

You’ve hit on some very important points….I’ll be sure to pass on the comix to you soon. There's tremendous potential on remixing Second Life culture for yec education and we definitely welcome suggestions as we script and finetune C Darfur.

Posted by: evonne | Friday, May 12, 2006 at 03:15 PM

What seems to be getting lost in much of the back and forth in the blogosphere that it’s possible for both Hamlet and Ethan to be ... “hold your breath” ... rig don’t see either position being fundamentally incorrect. What I see are disconnections occurring at other levels. That’s a shame since it puts people at odds who should be united.

As to how the technology can be better utilized in general so that it’s useful more apparent, I’d refer to something posted on RCommunication by Rebecca Mackinnon:

"The question we really ought to be focusing on is: how can citizens and professional journalists work together to create a better and more well-informed public discourse?"

I disagreed. Here’s my response:
“I would phrase that differently. Perhaps to something like this: how can citizens and professional journalists work together to make well-informed public discourse fashionable?”

SL is becoming fashionable. And those interested in getting the word out might consider that it’s not about educating people, it’s about helping people educate themselves. Give people a reason to stop their own activities (which are their escape from life’s difficulties) and make them want to learn. That’s a tough or fill, but it’s the one that has to be placed into.

Posted by: csven | Sunday, May 14, 2006 at 03:34 PM

“To make well-informed public discourse fashionable.”

Hee. Csven, I always suspected that Bruce Sterling was one of your meatspace alts!

No, but really, that’s such a smart distinction you made above, and coincident following the reasoning behind Sterling’s Viridian movement.

Yeah, we’re all of us at some kind of crux right now. Let’s just try to make sure that doesn’t lead to crucifixion ...

Posted by: Memory Harker | Monday, May 15, 2006 at 07:08 AM

"Hee. Csven, I always suspected that Bruce Sterling was one of your meatspace alts!"

ouch

Posted by: csven | Monday, May 15, 2006 at 08:36 AM

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"Hamlet Reborn” (The new New World Notes officially begins)
“The Skin You're In” (An experiment with avatar race)
"The Second Life of Lawrence Lessig”
“And Your Chicks for Free” (MTV comes to SL)
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