

Life in the virtual world after Second Life

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For some start-up technology companies, success seems like something that will never happen. But for two Australian software developers, the search for success has led to new realities of their own.

Virtual worlds burst onto the scene a few years ago, popularised by US company Linden Lab and its Second Life world. But while reports have suggested that many of the companies that established a presence in Second Life have quietly packed up shop, virtual reality software is becoming big business, as developers create their own virtual reality tools for business or leisure purposes.

Australian companies Simmersion Holdings and VastPark both received enthusiastic receptions when they exhibited at the Virtual Worlds Conference in New York City in April this year.

Simmersion producer Ben Hamey says the company's Mycosm software lets developers create their own highly-realistic virtual worlds using easy-to-use tools.

"We came into it with a pretty strong emphasis on user experience, and bringing it back to a consumer level," he says. "The virtual world space has been pretty stagnant, and it was ripe for other parties to come in who can see the problems with it, and Simmersion has done that."

Hamey says the company has also tried to bring graphics quality up to the photo-realistic environments of computer games.

While Mycosm has so far only been demonstrated behind closed doors, in September, Simmersion will be returning to the Virtual Worlds Conference, this time in Los Angeles, with a public demonstration. The company will then begin beta testing, and is aiming specifically to recruit 3D artists in the hope of convincing them to create content for Mycosm's virtual worlds.

Hamey says Simmersion has already received strong interest from education and health professionals. The company has even been approached by a global cosmetics company about creating a virtual products testing centre for consumers to try its products online before making a purchase.

Fellow Australian virtual world software maker VastPark has already released its software to the general public, having created a tool that helps developers create worlds and objects that can be immediately published to other users online.

Founder Bruce Joy says the company is currently negotiating to licence its tools to a prominent Australian university to be used in design classes so students can quickly get their 3D designs online where they can be viewed and manipulated by others.

"VastPark is being shaped into a toolset that developers and designers can actually use, to make thing that they want to create," Joy says. "What we're building is a future operating system for visualising data and things, so that they can be addressed and manipulated remotely."

One of the issues for businesses using virtual worlds is they cannot always employ people to be talking to the people who are visiting their virtual offices. The Australian software developer MyCyberTwin believes it has solved this problem using software that mimics the responses of real people, and can be used in virtual worlds to answer basic questions and provide information.

Co-founder Dr John Zakos says these artificial personalities, dubbed CyberTwins, were recently used by NASA in Second Life to answer questions about the Phoenix mission to Mars.

"People are going to these virtual worlds, but they are actually quite bare and empty," Zakos says. "So essentially CyberTwins are filling that void and providing that 24/7 human experience."

He says users are happy with the interaction with CyberTwins more than 90 per cent of the time, and they also serve to increase the amount of time a visitor spends in a location.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/08/26/1219516445567.html>