

The Virtual Craze

Are You Up on It?

by Courtney Bromwich

Have you been “There,” yet? Been where? *There!* For those of you who have no clue of what I am talking about, I am referring to the latest virtual reality world to gain recognition on the web, *There.com*, a competitor of the ever popular Second Life. But unlike its rival that boasts hundreds of thousands of visitors each month, *There* has flown under the radar for a number of years. You may be surprised to know that *There’s* conception began in the spring of 1998, a year prior to the founding of Second Life company, Linden Labs. After the developing stages and the beta testing that ensued, *There* launched its site to the public in October 2003. Four years, you may say. Over four years? Are you scratching your head thinking, why haven’t I heard of this? Actually, I did too to be honest. My first introduction into this immersive 3D interactive world was when I read a newspaper article announcing the partnership formed between Coca-Cola and *There.com*. I began wondering, what is so cool about this site that the world’s largest fountain drink conglomerate felt compelled to be a part of it? I wanted to know. So I decided to do a little bit of my own research, and hence, Danzia, my avatar, was “born.” Here’s a brief overview about my adventure in this alternate universe and perspective about what it may mean to the enterprise market.

First, I went to the *There.com* webpage. My initial reaction was “it’s pretty basic.” With few buttons and little text to crowd the page, I felt I could easily navigate this site without getting too overwhelmed, which said a lot considering I was still relatively new to the



whole virtual reality world thing. So, I viewed this page with its colorful background and cartoon-ish pictures and got the distinct impression that this site was geared towards “twens.” This furthered my confidence level that my venture would be a successful one. Browsing through the seven tabs detailing *There’s* offerings (about, get, play, live, create, now in, new in), I was able to see a

picture and read a brief description of each. Then I clicked on the video demo, “Aral’s Day Out.” This demo (closely resembling a music video) showed Aral, the *There.com* “spokesperson,” traveling by hoverboard, jet pack, and vehicle to hang out with her friends while shopping, paintballing, or grabbing a drink. This did not look too hard.

Getting Started

So after going through the above listed activities, I figured it was time to get started. In order to do this, I had to download and install the 500MB application, which took roughly 15 minutes. I then signed up for the free account, which was fairly easy, and chose a screen name for my avatar: Danzia. Unlike Second Life, where a first and last name has to be given to each avatar, There.com screen names are similar to those handles found on IM or in chatrooms. After securing a password, I was able to customize my avatar. Initially, I was only able to choose between three skin tones and hairstyles. I found this to be a bit limiting, but I discovered I could further modify my character by visiting one of the many spas scattered throughout the *There* islands. Next, I viewed the six page visitor's guide. Eight minutes later, I was orientated! But in case I had further questions, I could always access the guide. This was comforting to know. So with all this information in hand, off I went to explore.

Initially, I was “dropped” onto a beach that was densely developed and littered with avatars. Never in any of my other log on experiences did I encounter so many people...it was as if I crashed a beach party. So here I am trying to get acquainted with my surroundings, but I can barely see or make my way around because of all the other avatars dropping in. You see, after a member has successfully logged on, he/she has to wait for his/her avatar image to load, which may take up to a few minutes. During this time, the avatar may actually appear behind a dressing screen. No joke! By preventing an avatar from accidentally exposing itself while the images are loading, *There* maintains its mission of providing a “PG-13” environment for all its members. A noble idea, but kind of annoying all the same, because all I can see are a bunch of obtrusive dressing room doors running around. I do have to admit though, that in a way, it's a bit comical and somewhat reminiscent of the shenanigans one would expect of Alice's adventures in Wonderland. As I diligently try to maneuver my way through the maze of people and doors, I come across numerous TIKI huts. But before I am able to figure out what they are there for, a male avatar in white shorts and a Hawaiian print shirt starts harassing me. He does not attempt to chat, just follows me around in a stalker-ish manner. When I walk he walks, when I stop he stops. So I open my map, pick a random destination, and hightail it out of there. I am teleported to South Road Overlook, a high ridge of the southern desert region Cangrejo. This happened to be a welcome change in scenery. Only three other people were wandering around the island during the time I was there, so I was able to venture around in peace.



My Explorations

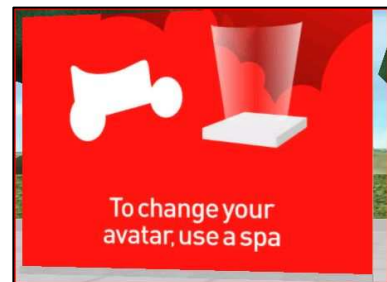
One of the first places I explored on this island was a member's personal house. Though it was roped off, it was only to show the boundaries of the property; so, the house was actually accessible to the public. With little to see besides a couch and big screen TV on the first floor and a bed upstairs, I toured the house in under two minutes. I felt it lacked in creativity and was ready to move on. Across the way, however, I found another member's “crib” that was anything but basic. Unlike the previous one, this area

did not physically resemble the structure of a house; it was just a big roped off area in the desert with everything imaginable inside. There were numerous big screen TV's with still pictures of I-pod-like dancers, several beds, a bar, a master bathroom complete with dual showerheads, and even a prisoner of love cage. I spent quite awhile walking around, but found most of the items to be for viewing only. For example, the bathroom was not functional, so what was its purpose? I would have liked to have been given some insight on the property development process, but neither of the owners were at home while I was visiting.

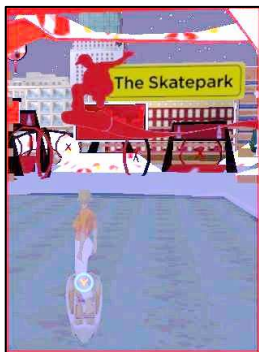
Next, I visited CC Metro Island, the new home of the Coke Studios community and one of the several hotspots in *There*. I initially appeared by a water fountain surrounded by plenty of benches as well as large red billboards helpfully



describing the many key action functions, such as how to chat, walk, run, etc. This is the middle point of the island, which is shaped like a giant Coke bottle. On one side is Candler Park, a nicely landscaped area complete with bridges and picnic tables. An in-world theater is also housed here. It



advertises numerous show times throughout the day, but I was never able to actually view a movie. I found this to be the case with a lot the buildings on this island. They had no functionality. Now, while I was able to actually enter the theater and sit down, the other "businesses" were just facades that could not be entered. Maybe these are some of the "fun additions...planned for the future," according to *There's* website. Now while the design appears intricate, CC Metro is still just in the beginning phases of development. Its presence was only announced in early December 2007. Though Coke promises big things of its new virtual location, it seems that many of its users still prefer www.cokestudios.com. On my first visit to Candler Park, I found a billboard where members could post messages (but upon return, it had been removed). Some had gripes about the migration to CC Metro. Evidently, a lot of things were not able to transfer over, but instead, were compensated for in Therebucks – the site's currency. But most of the complaints had to do with the lack of things to do. I would have to agree on this point. The only thing I could find of any value on the island was the skate park located in Pemberton Place. Here, I could hop on my "old school" hoverboard (the one issued when I signed up) and enter a race through what I thought was a pretty difficult course. I was able to complete the course....eventually! However, I was constantly left in the dust by the more experienced riders with snazzier boards. Hopefully, there is more to come, because a skate park is not enough to keep me coming back.



Especially, when *There* offers a variety of skate parks elsewhere on the different islands.

There are also several other cool places noteworthy of visiting. For those interested in travel, what could be easier on the wallet than a quick trip to Egypt through *There*? It offers the Sphinx and a tomb filled with ancient hieroglyphics that can be explored during the museum-like visiting hours. The island was originally still under development, but since my first visit, the construction of three pyramids has been completed. Another place worth visiting simply for its ingenuity is Frosty. This snow covered island is

actually in the shape of a snowman and is home to Candy Cane Lane and Santa's Village. But, for those more interested in socializing, *There* provides an array of venues for members to host events such as conferences or parties. For example, there is actually a place called the Socializer. This relatively large venue has many rooms, all of which are themed after major holidays. There is a St. Patrick's Day bar and an intimate Valentine's Day hang out. But please note,



when I revisited this location to snap a few photos, the Socializer was still there, but in a different capacity. The holiday themed rooms no longer existed. Instead, there was only a single water fountain in the middle of the desert surrounded by a few barren trees. Maybe the facility's



appearance varies from event to event, because it is built out to the renter's specifications. Another venue that is fun in nature and great for hosting large groups is the amusement park, Tropical Adventures. With rides like the Ferris wheel, spin-n-tilt, flying boat, and the classic carousel, it is a mini version of Six Flags. Who wouldn't have fun there? Both the Socializer and Tropical Adventures can be rented out to host events, costing \$20,000 and \$80,000 Therebucks respectively. Roughly equivalent to \$11 to \$44 US dollars. But for those events on a slightly smaller scale and budget, there are numerous meeting rooms and stages all throughout the islands.



Pros & Cons

There's official "positioning statement" describes the site as the *first online getaway that gives you the freedom to play and talk naturally while having fun and making friends*. Not mentioned in the above statement is the ease with which all this can be done. The ability to chat, emote, perform an action or get from place to place is as easy as 1-2-3. For instance, to form a chat group or begin a conversation, simply start typing and a balloon (like in the comic strips) will pop up overhead displaying the text. To maneuver the avatar, just press the arrow key for the direction the character should walk. In order to pick up the pace, I only needed to press the arrow key 2-3 times before my avatar began running. While running around, I came across some action prompts. These little encircled arrows appeared throughout the site to signal actions allowing avatars to enter a facility, sit on a bench, or leave a conversation. I was able to ride shotgun in a buggy belonging to another member just by pressing the sit arrow. Another cool feature that any non-savvy computer user could figure out is how to display emotions, which can be done one of two ways. To exhibit a particular emotion, such as a smile or a kiss, merely type an apostrophe in front of the word describing that sentiment or click on the emotions tab to find the desired feeling. It is amazing how expressive these avatars can be. Michael Wilson, CEO of Makena Technologies, describes the *There* avatars as "expressive, natural and includ[ing] so many little details – like the breathing or the subtle body positioning." When an avatar is not being instructed to move, chat or express a feeling, it displays a variety of everyday normal body language. For example, if I left

Danzia alone for any period of time, she would inadvertently look around, shift her body weight, and even place her hand on her hip. Pretty realistic programming!

Other interesting features of the site include “try-o-matic” machines, spas, and mp3 music hotspots. Items, including everything from clothing and hairstyles to hoverboards and vehicles, are actually created by the members of *There*. Once the design has been approved by a staff member, these items become available for sale to the public. But before committing any Therebucks, the try-o-matics allow members to try before they buy. For five minutes, I was able jet around the countryside on a pretty sweet hoverboard. And after visiting a spa, I was sporting/trying out a head-to-toe new outfit and a hip, blue ponytail. I found these try-o-matic machines to be extremely beneficial, but not something completely unheard of. In the real world, I would never purchase a car without taking it for a test drive first. Now I mentioned visiting the spas. At any of the various locations, I was able to step behind a dressing door and change



any number of things: eye color, shape of eyebrows, body definition, etc. If I left the Treatments platform without saving my changes, Danzia would return to her original look. Danzia’s outfit and accessories could be changed at the spa or at any other time just by using the ChangeMe tool. However, I could not change my avatar’s outfit or hair style, because nothing was available in my inventory except for the clothes given to me when I started. To have additional wardrobe choices, I would have had to “go

shopping” and spend a few Therebucks. This was kind of a bummer. Since I was on a free account, I did not have a dime to my name. And on top of that, everyone knew I was a newcomer or a “n00b” since the clothes I had on (my lovely peach top and white capris) were the generic ones issued to every female on the site. Last, but not least, are the mp3 music hotspots. While roaming around the islands, occasionally a warning would pop up to alert me that I was entering one of these hotspots. Whenever I was “within earshot” of a sound system that was turned on, I was automatically connected to the Internet radio station to which it was tuned. If music playing from a sound system was annoying me, I could mute it or simply adjust the volume on my computer. I viewed this as another outlet for members to express themselves and their creativity.

Now while there is a lot to awe over, *There* does have its drawbacks. My main frustration is with the graphics. They can take quite a while to load. Most of the time, buildings, clothing, signs, etc. appear as solid white structures, as in the picture to the right. As time progresses, the image finally gains definition as the colors appear. But sometimes, not even the outlines of objects appear. Sometimes something is not there, and then suddenly it is. This happened to me numerous times, especially when I transported to CC Metro. I tried to walk forward, but to no avail. It was as if Danzia had hit a glass wall that she was repeatedly bouncing off of. I couldn’t understand what was happening, and to top that, it was making my eyes hurt. After three minutes, I closed out of the program and restarted the whole application, but that did not solve the issue. Aggravated, I walked away to grab a drink from the fridge.



When I came back, one of Coke's many signs had suddenly appeared, but previously, there was nothing to suggest its existence. Now, I know to back up and try another route, because there just may be something in my way. I am under the impression that this occurs in the places that are intricately designed and have a large number of graphics trying to load at one time. I generally did not incur this problem on the islands that had less stimulating visuals.

In Conclusion

I found my experience on *There* to be very enlightening. *There* does a lot to ensure its users will have a pleasant experience. For example, all avatar clothing must adhere to the Minimum Coverage Requirements. While I did come across a few girls that were pretty skimpily-clad, I can honestly say that I did not encounter any wardrobe malfunctions. Also, material considered offensive or sexually suggestive is not allowed. *There* strictly enforces its PG-13 standards, and this is achieved a number of ways: a profanity filter screens communications for inappropriate language, staff members review each item submission before allowing it to appear in the shop for purchase, and an avatar cannot die much less display blood or gore. This is very comforting to me and I'm sure to many parents out there. *There* also has behavior guidelines with severe actions taken against those who repeatedly violate them. Eventually, a member can be banned from the site and his/her account disabled. *There* even goes as far as to prevent that computer from being able to log on again.

Now from a business aspect, I could only find a few companies partaking in the site. This may be due in part to *There* not wanting to subject its users to subliminal advertising. No obnoxious billboards or flashing ads can be found popping up around every corner. Now while I very much appreciate this aspect, businesses solely wanting to advertise (and not put forth the effort into



constantly maintaining a virtual company) may not. These companies may look to other outlets such as Second Life or MySpace. But for the businesses looking to extend into the virtual world, many may be drawn to *There* for its PG-13 rating and filters that prevent questionable content. At least, that is what *There* is hoping for. In addition to Coke, I could only find two other organizations with locations, Applebee's and CosmoGirl. Applebee's has a small, open-air hangout area. But other than being named "Applebee's Hangout," there were no logos, posters, or items of any kind indicating it was associated with the restaurant Applebee's. There were also no employees or visitors while I was there. CosmoGirl, on the other hand, is a well frequented place with lots of fun, social events always taking place. For instance, just last week, CosmoGirl successfully hosted a prom! It was so well attended that 8 identical layers were needed to accommodate all the avatars. On each layer, awards were given to the best dressed male, best dressed female, and the cutest couple. A prom king and queen were even announced. Other activities that CosmoGirl has previously hosted include pajama parties, talent shows, and modeling competitions...just to name a few. I believe the site

is a perfect interactive outlet for this magazine, because both *There* and CosmoGirl cater to the same demographic...teenagers!

It will be interesting to see if/how other companies embrace *There*. The site offers lots of possibilities when it comes to enterprise. For starters, *There's* atmosphere is extremely conducive to the gathering of people. Whether it be for employee training, brainstorming, or meeting with clients, there are so many venues (all varying in size, shape, and décor) that a business would easily be able to find one to best suit its needs. *There* is also a good site to move merchandise through. In addition to ongoing auctions held to purchase virtual items, members can also sell real world items. Businesses could hop on this bandwagon, giving them another market through which to retail. Many companies on Second Life are already doing this. They sell their product(s) in Linden dollars (SL Currency) or offer a direct link to the company website through which the customer can purchase the item(s) in US dollars. Finally, companies could have an actual location on the site, like Coke's CC Metro, to serve both their more beneficial to a company than its corporate website? I have yet to determine that fact. But with *There's* limitless creative possibilities, it is only a matter of time.

I feel that *There* already has a lot to offer, but it will be interesting to see what ensues as *There* continues to develop. I plan to revisit *There* in the months ahead, and hopefully, I will have more to tell you as the site evolves.