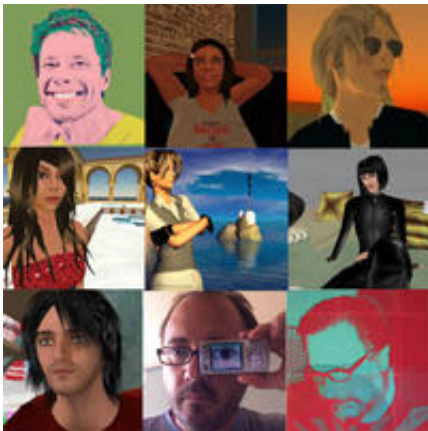


Second Life Offers Second Chance for Real Life Players

January 8 2008



UC Riverside's eLab City development in Second Life allows people to be someone else in another world while researchers study consumer behavior.

UC Riverside's eLab City development in Second Life allows people to be someone else in another world while researchers study consumer behavior. In the first half of 2008, consumers can make a new life for themselves in an online community offered through eLab City at UCR's Sloan Center.

“A number of reasons exist for the popularity of Second Life environments,” said Thomas Novak, Albert O. Steffey professor of marketing at UCR's A. Gary Anderson Graduate School of Management and co-founder of the Sloan Center for Internet Retailing. “While there is an element of escape to virtual worlds, there are also very positive

motivations like the desire for a creative outlet and for new forms of social interaction.”

Most academic simulations in Second Life are “virtual campuses” oriented to classroom instruction and course support. There are, however, no academic Second Life projects devoted to studying how consumers behave in virtual worlds. eLab City will be a platform for the academic study of virtual consumption. Modeled as a “live-work-play” community, eLab City will provide a working laboratory and subject pool for academic research.

Pre-built residential apartments will be provided – primarily to students - for fixed periods of time at no charge with larger units for management. eLab City will also virtually house a consumer lab, office space, library, conference rooms, survey space, resident-run shops, a cinema, concert stage, and an exhibition hall for art, design and fashion shows. The opening show at eLab City’s exhibition hall in Spring 2008, “Virtual Virtual,” will feature original work by noted digital artist Peter Stanick. eLab City itself is being developed for the UCR Sloan Center by the team of visual artist and composer Cezary Ostrowski (aHead agency, Poland) and film editor Nadia Hennrich.

As an academic research facility and platform, eLab City combines a panel of Second Life users, survey and experimental research capabilities, and tools for unobtrusively tracking user behavior given informed consent.

“It’s a working laboratory and a subject pool for academic research,” Novak said.

The UCR Sloan Center is currently collaborating with the London office of GMI (Global Market Insite, Inc.), a provider of global market intelligence solutions, to develop eLab City’s online academic panel of

Second Life residents. A second project conducted in collaboration with GMI uses automated “survey bots” to approach and interview Second Life residents.

Through the UCR Sloan Center, eLab City will provide a vehicle for companies to sponsor cutting edge academic research. Similar to the early years of the commercial Web in the mid 1990s, companies today are struggling to understand how virtual worlds will play out in the coming years. eLab City hopes to offer some answers.

The list of areas of study is almost as immense as the possibilities for the players. Novak hopes to study peer/social influence, decision making, virtual consumption, group behavior, merchandizing, branding, research methodology and social capital among others.

“True physical attractiveness and social skills don’t impact first impressions online, but what about virtual attractiveness and social skills? This is one aspect of research we will be studying,” Novak said.

Although Second Life is sometimes referred to as a game, Second Life does not fit the standard definition. It does not have points, scores, winners or losers, levels, an end-strategy, or most of the other characteristics of games, though it can be thought of as a game on a more basic level because it is played for fun.

Novak said that Second Life provides an excellent platform for study because it’s the most socially and economically complex virtual world environment to date.

Link: elabcity.com/

Source: University of California, Riverside

Citation: Second Life Offers Second Chance for Real Life Players (2008, January 8) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-01-life-chance-real-players.html>

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