IBM Creates Software for Holding Face-to-Face Meetings in Virtual Worlds

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IBM is making it easier for widely dispersed businesspeople to interact and collaborate without the time and expense of in-person meetings.

What is making all this possible is the marriage between "virtual world" Web sites, and "unified communications and collaboration tools" -- technology that links such things as voicemail, audible chat, and instant messaging. Virtual worlds are interactive, immersive Web sites with three-dimensional graphics. There, people are represented by versions of themselves, called avatars. With origins in multi-player gaming sites, virtual worlds re-create the social and visual dynamics and cues of human interaction, and are now increasingly used in business settings.

IBM is now allowing selected clients test Sametime 3D, a new tool which will let business colleagues not only exchange instant messages and chat verbally, but also share presentations and ideas in private, prefabricated, reusable meeting spaces located in a variety of virtual worlds. These spaces will allow participants to, literally, throw ideas on the wall during a meeting to "see what sticks," and to vote on, organize, and save the most promising proposals. Avatars can make presentations to one another, socialize, debate, or, literally, examine ideas and 3D objects from all angles.

IBM's new software enables groups based in different locations to meet on a regular, periodic or impromptu basis in these virtual worlds. With this new software tool, IBM is providing several reusable meeting spaces, including a theater-style amphitheatre, a boardroom and a

collaboration space which can each be used for impromptu or scheduled brainstorming sessions, status updates, town hall-style meetings, rehearsals, training classes, and more.

"This project is part of IBM's ongoing work to redefine the nature of online meetings," said Colin Parris, IBM's Vice President for Industry Solutions and Emerging Business. "The work that takes place during a meeting is hard enough; people shouldn't have to struggle with logistics. Whether through improvements to Web conferencing capabilities or with special offerings such as Sametime 3D, IBM is offering new ways to engage and collaborate, making meetings more effective and productive."

The new software overcomes several challenges that have existed for businesses wishing to hold meetings in virtual worlds: First, businesses can collaborate the way in which they are accustomed, using software they may already have, such as electronic presentations, enterprise security, and instant messaging tools. Second, IBM has prefabricated a variety of re-useable spaces specifically designed for productive meetings, making it unnecessary for adopters to painstakingly build meeting rooms each time they want to meet. Third, these spaces are secure, overcoming privacy concerns manifest in many public areas of popular virtual worlds. And finally, colleagues not wishing to participate in a given virtual meeting can still view documents, presentations and results from those sessions -- or even snapshots of a previous meeting.

In the future, the software will provide a variety of ways for participants to circulate reports to one another that document the meetings' progress. IBM will also make it easier for users to chat verbally and exchange information generated by and for virtual meetings, with traditional computer software already installed on their computers and servers.

Selected IBM clients and business partners are now being invited to work with IBM's Lotus Services organization to test this new software. The solution, which may be available by the second half of 2009, uses version 8.0 of IBM Lotus Sametime, and a plug-in designed by IBM Research for virtual worlds. When the software is developed fully, clients will be able to use it to connect any number of virtual worlds, such as OpenSim or Second Life.

Provided by IBM