

Virtually endless possibilities?

Conducting research in Second Life

By Mario Menti

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The media is calling Second Life the future of the internet. With more than 6.5 million residents worldwide, the virtual world has the momentum of a freight train, but little direction. It's still a bit of a novelty, just like the early days of the internet, but this time, businesses don't want to be left behind. Many Fortune 500 companies are scrambling to figure out how to market products, advertise and make money in the new medium, but they have yet to find the silver bullet.

While marketers may not be gaining much traction, market researchers could soon find endless possibilities in Second Life. The key for researchers is the open source code that powers Second Life. It allows people to create their own persona, design buildings, and even create interactive objects like billboards that ask pre-programmed market research questions whenever someone walks by.

This open source nature of Second Life makes it a little like the Wild West, which allows market researchers to create anything they want, as long as they have the requisite programming knowledge. Second Life's tagline "Your World. Your Imagination." holds true for market researchers as much as anyone else.

Product and concept testing take on an exciting new direction in Second Life. Consumers are always in interactive mode, sitting on furniture, trying on clothes or even wander up and down the aisles of a virtual store. It doesn't take a huge leap of the imagination to move onto co-creation, and picture a scenario where avatars (the virtual representation of the people that explore Second Life) help design and build product prototypes as part of the market research process.

Many virtual research techniques translate easily into Second Life. Virtual shopping malls and stores could provide a shopping experience that combines elements of virtual shopping and shelf layout testing with *real* in-world purchasing and product usage observation. Products being sold and tested in virtual stores could contain real-life products (Amazon-powered shops in Second Life already exist) or products for use inside the virtual world, such as clothes for people's avatars. And unlike the real world, Second Life can provide market researchers with the means to measure not only what people say they will do, but also what they actually end up doing.

The last few months have also brought the first metrics solutions to Second Life. One product deploys sensors on a company's virtual land that records and analyzes the number of visitors, as well as their movement on the land. Adding a survey component to a metrics solution can enrich that data, adding attitudinal and opinion data to traffic and behavioral data. It's similar to the way feedback gathered through surveys enriches usage metrics and click-stream data on the web.

Experimental programs

In an effort to see what's possible, experimental programs are now being developed that enable web survey software platforms to reach directly into the virtual world. These programs make use of the capability to add interactivity and animation to objects created inside Second Life, which also provides the means to connect to the internet via HTTP requests. This means that a scripted object that exists inside Second Life can interact both with objects and people/avatars in the virtual world, and at the same time with the internet at large.

These programs work using a text-only interface between web survey software and Second Life, which enables an object inside Second Life to sense an avatar passing by, which it prompts to take part in a survey by *talking* to it. The avatar agrees to take part in the survey by touching the object. The survey object, which physically could be anything at all – a kiosk, a billboard, even a shapely female avatar, starts delivering the survey through Second Life's chat channel.

Basically, the object asks questions, and the avatar answers by talking to it. While this method of survey delivery limits the complexity of questions that can be asked (for example, a grid/matrix-type question would not translate well to text), it does offer the advantage of not breaking the immersion of the virtual world environment, and makes use of the natural communication channels used by Second Life residents. The process is entirely interactive, and always directly connected to survey collection software, so every answer is stored. The follow-up question is delivered based on what the survey logic determines should be asked next. For specific surveys, it would also be possible to build objects that respond to users' touch and/or actions. For example, rating scales could be physically moved to provide rating feedback, or entire objects could be built to represent a question to be asked, with the respondent being able to manipulate the object in order to give their response.

On completion of a survey, Second Life respondents can be rewarded for their participation with a monetary incentive, just like in the real world, using Second Life's in-world currency, the Linden dollar. That same object that senses passers-by and conducts the survey can also pay the respondent on the spot, making automatic transactions really easy. The moment the survey is complete, the survey object can transfer a certain amount of Linden dollars to the respondent's avatar. This makes for an extremely cost-efficient process, taking advantage of existing Second Life infrastructure rather than having to involve manual processes or payment fulfillment by a third-party. Residents can then use these well-earned Linden dollars inside Second Life to purchase items and services, or exchange them for U.S. dollars at special Linden dollar exchange outlets.

Virtual interviewer

It is also possible to create a half-human/half-robot *virtual face-to-face interviewer*. An experimental modified version of the Second Life client was created that is in effect a market research interviewer terminal, turning the person who connects through it into a semi-human, clipboard-carrying market research interviewer who can walk around Second Life, chat with other residents, and – if they are willing to take part in a survey – switch to an automatic data collection mode. Once this data collection mode is activated, the automated software kicks in, asks questions and records the responses. The respondent's answers are fed back to the survey collection software through the modified Second Life interviewer. Once a survey is completed, the interviewer can switch back to normal mode and continue on his way. It's a virtual intercept survey, so to speak, but more efficient than its real-life counterpart due to the fact that all data is collected in real time, eliminating the need to enter data at a later stage. And again, incentives can be built into the process automatically, adding to the overall efficiency of a *virtual interviewer* solution.

While data can be collected in Second Life by integrating with existing survey software platforms, the 3D nature of Second Life also lends itself to effective and interesting data visualization opportunities. Linking 3D objects to survey data, bar or pie charts could turn into objects that dynamically grow and shrink in response to results being collected. Avatars could literally stand next to or sit on top of a survey chart, and watch it change shape as the survey responses are updated. And of course, this is not limited to shape: objects could change color or move around, all in response to data being fed from survey data analysis.

More is possible

While some of these examples may be of debatable practical use right now, they illustrate that in virtual worlds, and Second Life in particular, a lot more is possible than conducting simple web surveys. Thinking back about 10 years, the vast majority of web surveys simply replicated telephone surveys in a web browser, not making full use of the multimedia capabilities available to them through the use of the new medium. In the same way today, most of the early market research activities in Second Life have been limited to using simple web surveys for data collection, not taking advantage of the opportunities and technologies this particular medium offers. As the virtual worlds are themselves getting increasingly sophisticated, this is guaranteed to change – with a combination of technical prowess and imaginative thinking, who knows what kinds of survey experiences market researchers will be able to provide in the virtual world!

In any environment, whether real or virtual, the survey experience is key. As companies and marketers are starting to experiment in Second Life, there is a growing feeling that many are simply doing it for PR's sake, without any real relevance to Second Life residents. The more engaging and rewarding the survey experience is, the more likely it will be seen as an integral and useful part of the virtual world, rather than a disjointed bolt-on from the outside. Second Life users aren't hostile to brands and marketing involvement per se: a recent poll that surveyed more than 9-thousand in the U.S. shows that Second Life is a burgeoning market for real-life brands and product promotion. Fifty-six percent of users questioned believe Second Life is a good promotional vehicle. Only 16 percent say they would not be more likely to buy or use a brand that is represented in the virtual world.

At the forefront

Second Life is increasingly seen as a first incarnation of a coming 3D internet or *metaverse*, and it's not that far-fetched any more to imagine a time in the near future when our avatars will wander a web of connected, virtual spaces instead of today's flat, relatively impersonal 2D web environment. Linden Lab founder Philip Rosedale said in an interview that technology-wise, this vision is only 18 months away, while in a recent survey, Gartner suggests that 80% of internet users will be active participants of virtual worlds by the end of 2011. No matter what timelines and predictions are made, market researchers can be at the forefront of this new frontier by taking advantage of available technology right now.

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