

# IBM to open islands in virtual world



By RACHEL KONRAD, AP Technology Writer  
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SAN FRANCISCO - IBM Corp. is launching an ambitious marketing campaign in the hip virtual world "Second Life."

Big Blue has developed 12 "virtual islands," and most will be open to anyone with a Second Life account starting next week. Other areas will remain private haunts for about 800 IBM employees — including the CEO — who have cyber alter-egos.

Second Life is a subscription-based 3-D fantasy world devoted to capitalism — a 21st century version of Monopoly that generates real money for successful players. More than 1.95 million people worldwide have Second Life characters, called avatars.

At any given time, 10,000 or more avatars may be logged onto Second Life, socializing by instant messages or engaging in virtual pastimes such as flying, dancing, gambling or watching adult videos.

Second Life is notoriously buggy; avatars may spontaneously shed clothing, hair or limbs, and sometimes graphics take several seconds to render. In September, the San Francisco-based company that runs Second Life, Linden Labs, warned that a security breach may have exposed subscribers' data, including credit card numbers and passwords.

IBM's chief technologist, Dr. Irving Wladawsky-Berger, acknowledged Tuesday that virtual-world business is the "experimental stage." Big Blue doesn't expect to generate a profit in Second Life soon.

But the medium is promising — particularly for training and orientation sessions for Armonk, N.Y.-based IBM, which has 330,000 workers worldwide. Two in every five IBM employees work offsite part- or full-time, and it'd be vastly easier to host a virtual meeting than to assemble hundreds of salespeople or engineers in a physical conference room.

AP Photo: In this screen grab provided by IBM Corp., one of their virtual islands which will...

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The technology is particularly suited to online education — not only for executives but for kids, Wladawsky-Berger mused.

"Perhaps we can make major changes in how to teach kids of all sorts, including kids with disabilities and kids from poorer communities who might be disadvantaged in very 'text oriented' styles of teaching," Wladawsky-Berger's avatar, Irving Islander, said in a public forum hosted by CNet Networks Inc.

IBM spokesman Matthew McMahon said IBM might use Second Life for customer service.

"Instead of me trying to explain in a phone call how to unscrew your hard drive, someone in a more immersive 3D world could actually show you," McMahon said.

Toyota Motor Corp., Adidas AG and American Apparel Inc. have Second Life outposts. But marketing experts say technology companies have the most to gain from virtual worlds. Sun Microsystems Inc., Intel Corp., Advance Publications Inc.'s Wired magazine were Second Life pioneers.

"It gives them access to an audience that is technically literate and creative — that's a defined demographic that's beneficial to the tech business," said Tony Hynes, senior vice president of San Francisco-based Bite Communications, which helped develop Sun's virtual strategy. "For everyone else, it's a highly nascent medium, and I'm not really sure how beneficial it is."

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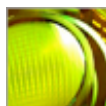
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