

Chapter 36

Virtual World Avatar Branding

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ABSTRACT

Avatar branding is the process of creating a virtual personality, establishing a well-known virtual identity, and immersing oneself as an active participant in virtual society. In virtual worlds such as Second Life and the many Opensim worlds, avatar branding is an essential capability for many kinds of virtual world users, such as fine artists, musicians, poets, writers, deejays, athletes, actors, fashion designers, and other kinds of virtual celebrities. This chapter discusses the process of avatar branding and covers several examples of famous branded avatars.

A NEW LIFE

When you enter a virtual world as a new user, you are establishing a new life, a new identity. You have no friends, no money, and no belongings other than default clothing and body parts that come with your avatar's inventory. Many of us in virtual worlds have had this experience multiple times. In fact, with the proliferation of worlds based upon the OpenSimulator technology (henceforth, OpenSim), it is not unusual to restart your virtual life dozens of times, as each new virtual world poses the same existential challenges. In OpenSim, it is wise to re-establish your avatar identity in as many virtual worlds as possible (proactively, before someone else assumes your identity). This is a very basic form of avatar branding, essentially you can proliferate your avatar name into many virtual worlds by creating new free accounts with the same usernames.

AVATAR BRANDING: INTRODUCTION

The term "brand" is inherited from the traditional practice of burning a unique symbol into cattle to distinguish them from other herds. Branding, as adopted by mass marketing, creates a public image of a product line which can have human qualities, such as warmth, sexiness, joy, or friendliness. Because marketing technologies, such as social networks, Web sites, and email lists, are available to individual citizens, we have arrived into an era of personalized branding. As Essid (2011) states, it is commonplace for today's students to devote vast energies into personally branding their real lives through social networking.

An avatar is a computer graphic representation of a person. Avatars are used widely in social networking, blogging, and advertising as iconic representations of brand images, whether personal

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or corporate. Your avatar picture can stand in as a thumbnail representation of you, your personality, and a brand image that you want to promote. As Sherman (2009) indicates, people who use the default image in social networking are becoming the exception and may even be viewed with suspicion.

In virtual worlds, we have avatars that we can reshape, dress, communicate, move about, and friend other avatars. We can play music, recite poetry, and have discussions. Virtual worlds are real-time three dimensional (3D) simulations of what happens in other social media, but in an intensely immersive way. In fact, we can photograph our avatars and use the image for other forms of Internet interactions, e.g. social networks.

When we promote our avatar and their activities for business or personal reasons we are personally branding a representation of ourselves. Many techniques of personal branding in social networks and avatar branding in virtual worlds are interchangeable, as evidenced by the author's own success on LinkedIn, which led to a cyber security book contract and an executive job opportunity in higher education. For example, Beard (2007) describes how to surf Digg sites of friends to discover other friends that you can friend. In virtual worlds and on LinkedIn, we can do the same with group memberships.

This chapter explains approaches for avatar branding in virtual worlds such as Second Life and Opensim worlds. The next section establishes some basic assumptions about the scope of avatar branding, the economics of virtual worlds, and the advertising environment. The succeeding sections cover the avatar branding process from inception of the avatar's virtual life. After that, several examples of famous branded avatars are discussed.

BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this chapter, the scope of virtual worlds includes Second Life and the nu-

merous Opensim worlds (<http://opensimulator.org>). Second Life (SL) is the social and economic center of virtual worlds, so the focus on avatar branding primarily applies to this world. Branded avatars have an increasing presence in Opensim worlds; for example, numerous SL musicians are available to play concerts in Opensim.

Opensim and Second Life share a common technology base; Opensim is the open source release of SL technology. Some essential SL features were held back by Linden Research, in particular the in-world events listings. Which is interesting: it indicates that Linden Research understands that the core of SL society revolves around outstanding advertising infrastructure. Avatar branding will use and benefit from this infrastructure.

At the time of this writing, virtual world economies appear reasonably stable. SL hosts extensive free economies (e.g. freebie stores and communities) as well as commerce for goods. Almost all live music and theatrical performances are free for the public in SL, as are most other activities such as poetry, deejay parties, sports, etc. Education is an emerging commercial industry in SL, particularly for natural language instruction; however, many other kinds of instruction, such as building skills and clothing design, are available free to the public. Most Opensim worlds have nascent but emerging economies; however they are more heavily reliant on free economies.

Advertising is an interesting economic phenomenon in virtual worlds (VW), and particularly important to avatar branding. Many forms of VW advertising are free, such as group notices, group instant messages, subscriber groups, email lists, and event listings. These kinds of advertising are also available in Opensim, although event listings are typically hosted on a Website calendar rather than in-world.

The advertising situation is changing in SL. Linden Research, the company that owns SL, posts curated event advertisements prominently in its new viewer, via an in-world tool called the Destination Guide. The new viewer does not

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