

Weekday warriors

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You might take the guise of an elf, while your boss poses as a knee-high lavender warthog with a tiara might sound strange or even, to echo one critic, stupendously kooky.

Witty dogs, butterflies, surfies and trolls often make good sense when they trot their ideas out at a virtual reality meeting, David Wilson writes.

PICTURE this. You walk into a conference hall with a shimmering Alice in Wonderland feel. Hardly anybody looks like a suit, frump or geek. The people you meet appear among other things as surfies, trolls and animals.

Welcome to "metaverse conferencing", the latest business communications twist guaranteed to make meetings less mundane. Metaverses are virtual reality (VR) worlds such as There, Entropia, Solipsis, the Palace and the wildly popular Second Life, all of which you can easily find by tapping the keywords into Google.

Within a metaverse's lush 3D parameters, in real time you can swap ideas with other "avatars" (visual representations of people) scattered around the country or globe. Meanwhile, if you like to make things more interesting, you can levitate a little, before finally everyone vanishes in a puff of pixels.

Sure, the idea of taking the guise of an elf, say, while your boss poses as a knee-high lavender warthog with a tiara and wings might sound strange or even, to echo one critic, stupendously kooky. But virtual reality meetings just might work, University of Technology, Sydney, VR expert Yusuf Pisan says.

Pisan says that already poetry readings, gallery openings, concerts and even classes routinely take place in Second Life. Assessing the prospects for the VR business meeting, he says: "When it is well organised, it can be a great success."

Pisan highlights how the graphical interface generates great conversation starters (imagine flattery along the lines of "nice tusks"). He adds that the ability to "whisper" - speak privately to an individual- allows background discussion.

Doubters and detractors might contest that whispering could just as easily promote spite and intrigue. However, Pisan paints whispering as "informal watercooler talk" that allows people to sound co-workers out and bounce ideas around before going public.

If you are late for a meeting, another advantage of metaverse immersion is that you can fly. Sunshine Coast-based virtual world-builder Miriam English recounts how, when searching for a bricks-and-mortar Melbourne office, she at first went up the wrong building.

"I sighed, looking across at the other building, thinking how easy it would be, in VR, to walk through the wall, fly across the intervening space, and enter the other building at the correct floor."

By comparison, reality seemed such a hassle.

The slickness and glamour of VR have helped attract the involvement of some heavyweight firms. Sun

Microsystems, Toyota, Wells Fargo and the BBC have all used Second Life to stage promotions. Meanwhile, English says, virtual worlds are becoming increasingly popular forums for firms of all sizes. She has attended hundreds, perhaps thousands of meetings inside virtual worlds.

Despite their glossy aura, virtual worlds are supposedly great for getting things done because they teach you to type fast, abbreviate and get to the point. "Waffling on (like I tend to) is not easily tolerated; a surprising amount gets accomplished in VR meetings," English says.

Apart from email, she prefers VR to any other communication medium. Videoconferencing takes up too much bandwidth because it means sending so much data.

The real world ranks as inferior, too, because of "massive downsides" such as time and fuel consumption. Describing real-world meetings as "incredibly wasteful", English tells how she once commuted regularly for an hour to attend a 30-minute meeting that could have been handled entirely by email.

"Real-world and video meetings also suffer from the fact that we humans are incredibly shallow. We try not to be, but we are," she continues, adding that if someone looks different, mistrust kicks in.

Provided executives choose to adopt generic rather than highly outlandish forms, virtual meetings discourage prejudice.

"If you meet and chat with a person who presents themselves as a dog or a butterfly or a surfer guy, you know from the outset that you can't really assume anything. Each of the people could be any age.

"Sex is indeterminate - even the surfer guy could actually be a woman. You are forced to treat them on the basis of their actual interactions."

Despite its many attractions, the VR realm can feel odd, English admits, citing how people chat in circles without looking at each other. Sometimes someone stands in a road, talking apparently to thin air but really with someone on the first floor of a building.

If such scenarios do not faze you, shifts in the balance of power might. Pisan says a charismatic speaker who dominates in the real world may find it harder to grab a VR group's attention than a shy colleague blessed with a quick wit and nimble fingers.

Anyway, luminous landscapes and figures can be so hard on the eye that only the devoted may be prepared to tolerate the discomfort. Swinburne University expert Matthew Bailes says: "I think the idea of a conference in a virtual world sounds like the ultimate nerd-fest. Most virtual reality environments I know of give you a headache after a while, so I'm not sure how it would work in practice."

How to set up a virtual conference

1. Choose your world. For information on the worlds available, go to virtuality3d.co.uk or www.virtualworldsreview.com.
2. Get your colleagues to download the VR client for the world you have chosen.
3. Arrange a venue and time for the meeting just as you would for a real-world meeting - for example "Pulveria Centre, Second Life". Beware differing time zones.
4. Choose your avatars (visual representations). Most virtual worlds offer ready-made looks.
5. Communicate by typing as though instant messaging everyone, which generates subtitle-style text.



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