

Here's a chat room worth talking about



**TODD
COPILEVITZ**
LIFE ON-LINE

Let's talk chat.

For lots of America Online users and recently, even Prodigy users, computerized chat has become addictive. But I've al-

ways found it so impersonal.

Say, just for the sake of argument, I drop in on a room called hubbahubba-hottub. Other than the name, there's nothing to differentiate it from any other room. Same white screen, same scrolling lines of text appearing as feverishly as the "speakers" can type them.

Wouldn't it be better to chat in a virtual world with real rooms, halls, lobbies? The rooms have brick or wood walls, the ceilings have light fixtures. The concourse even has escalators that move you along.

Best of all are the people, real people, faces, bodies and all. Now we're talking. Now we're in Worlds Chat.

Worlds Chat is the hottest innovation the Internet will see this year. Write it down, take it to the bank. It may well be the most important, too, not just for the innovation it marks but the potential it brings to cyberspace.

Worlds Chat is a new service from Worlds Inc. of San Francisco. It uses direct Internet connections, the type offered by local service providers and CompuServe, to gath-

Wouldn't it be better to chat in a virtual world with real rooms, halls, lobbies?

er users from around the world.

Before logging in, users must select a "body" from the gallery to represent themselves, literally a room with pictures on the walls and a checkerboard floor. In the jargon of virtual worlds, they're selecting avatars, or Digital Actors, as the service calls them.

Click on a picture and the body becomes a 3-D photo that can be viewed from all sides. Pick from teenagers, punkers, businessmen, fish, chess pieces, even a floating head of Nicole Brown Simpson. Once users embody an avatar, they zip into the Worlds Chat space station.

There, users move about using the arrows on the keyboard. The floors scroll by; walls and doors have perspective as you turn.

The station's hub is a lobby of sorts, with doors leading to the six wings. Other users appear as their avatars with their names overhead. If you're behind someone, they don't see you. If they log off, their avatar disappears in a flash of blue.

The discussion still scrolls by in a gray window, but now everything is in a real environment. There are small rooms with brick walls and large conference style rooms. There are even outdoor lobbies where users can admire the moving star

fields and Earth as it rotates.

Amazingly, all this is free. Download the software from the Worlds Inc. Web site (<http://www.kaworlds.com>) and off you go.

That's because Worlds Chat was created just to prove it could be done, says company spokesman Rob Schmults. Rather than trying to explain virtual worlds to customers, the company just created one. Worlds Chat does all the talking needed.

Later this year CompuServe will launch a chat service with avatars as well. But that service, Worlds Away, is more of a virtual comic book, with cartoon-like characters and chat confined to quote bubbles.

It's the first-person perspective, looking through the eyes of your avatar, that sets Worlds Chat apart from everything that's come before it. The technology will be used for teaching anatomy and physiology. It has already been used to create a cybermuseum for Absolut Vodka.

Consider the potential here.

Take a walk in an on-line library, with real books lining the walls. Click on one and up it pops. Got a question? Ask a real librarian behind the counter who receives your question on-line.

Shop in a virtual store with real clerks who can help you. Or meet with your friends and see pictures of their faces. It's all possible now, Mr. Schmults says.

"There's no question that it can be done," he says. "It's really a question of what do we do first and whom will we do the work for?"

This fall, the company will

launch the Internet Worlds Fair to further showcase its work and that of its clients.

I can't wait.

Todd Copilevitz can be sent E-mail on the Internet at toddcap@onramp.net or he can be reached by regular mail at P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265.