

Second Life is world of **virtual tedium**

We have been deluged recently with stories about the amazing virtual world of Second Life and the brave opportunities it creates for brands. It is hard to believe, but it has been little more than a year since the first major brand, US retailer American Apparel, opened its doors for virtual business on the site. The store sold virtual American Apparel clothing designed to be worn by the avatars that users create to populate Second Life.

American Apparel was soon joined by other brands. In October 2006, Starwood, the owner of hotel brands such as Westin and Sheraton, premiered its Aloft hotel brand on Second Life. Starwood saw its virtual hotel as a way of generating early customer insights about its venture long before any of the hotels opened.

A month later, Pontiac, the US car-maker, launched Motorati Island. According to Mark-Hans Richer, marketing director at Pontiac, it was designed to 'empower the car community in Second Life and develop with them in a unique and meaningful manner'. From April, Second Life boasted the ultimate marketing patronage when Coke launched a 'virtual thirst pavilion', where visitors could compete to create a virtual vending machine selling not Coke, but, according to the firm's website, 'the essence of Coca-Cola: refreshment, joy, unity, experience'.

It all sounds pretty amazing, until you visit Second Life. Having spent last weekend walking around its virtual universe, I have to report that the whole thing is pretty crap – a bit like Milton Keynes with a very bad hang-over. The branded locations that sounded so impressive in the pages of *BusinessWeek* are

very basic and virtually devoid of visitors. Despite Second Life's bold claims of 8m residents, the limited server space means that locations can handle only 70 avatars at a time. Once you leave the congested entry portal, however, this is hardly a problem as most of the site is eerily quiet and deserted. I grew so bored and lonely in Second Life that I resorted to removing my trousers and shouting at the occasional avatars that



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passed by in a desperate attempt to make contact.

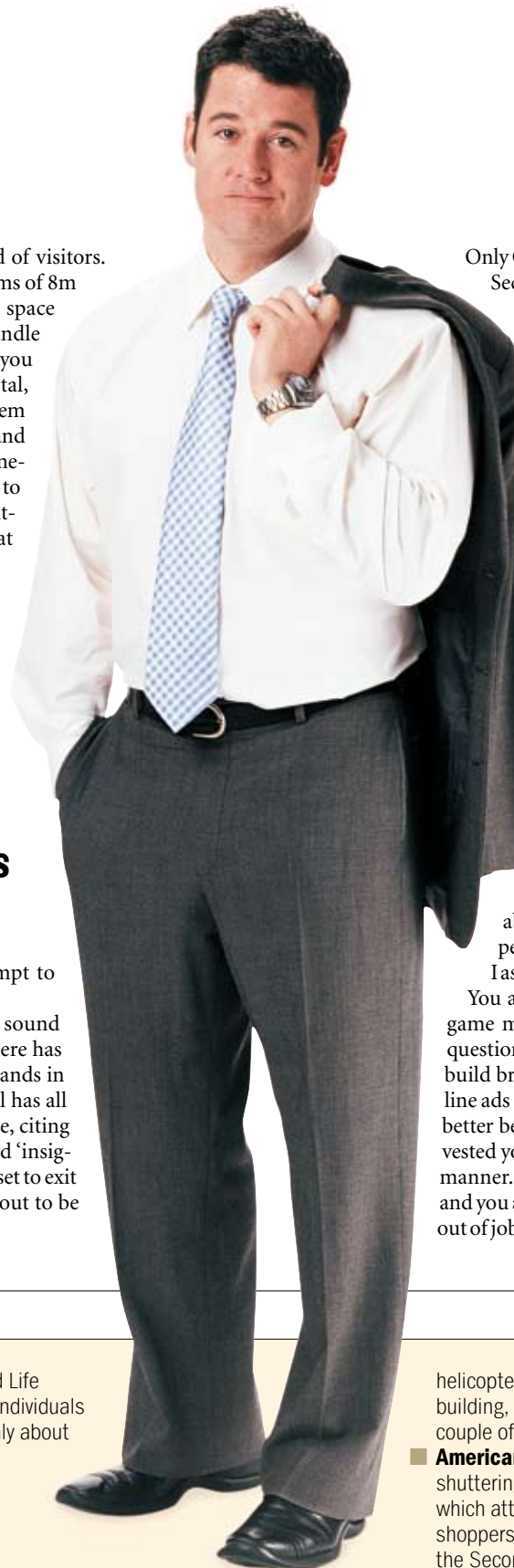
The lack of visitors or any sound strategic rationale for being there has begun to affect many of the brands in Second Life. American Apparel has all but given up on its virtual store, citing the criticism it has received and 'insignificant' sales. Starwood is also set to exit the site; its Aloft location is about to be handed over to another user.

Only Coca-Cola is bullish about its Second Life location. Michael Donnelly, the company's head of interactive marketing, accepts that much of Second Life is empty, but adds: 'My job is to invest in things that have never been done before.'

Second Life is an amazing technical feat, but when it comes to marketing and brand building we must retain a thick edge of cynicism and rigour. The site might be virtual, but the money being spent there by brands is very real and the logic behind that investment should be too.

Joseph Jaffe, the marketing consultant who helped Coke enter Second Life is quick to dismiss marketing rigour. 'This is not about reach. This is about connecting. So when people ask, "Why Second Life?" I ask "Why not?"'

You are exactly wrong, mate. The game might have changed, but the questions are the same. Whether you build brands with virtual stores, on-line ads or traditional media you had better be able to explain why you invested your marketing budget in that manner. Try doing it any other way and you are virtually guaranteed to be out of job. In the real world, at least.



30 seconds on... Second Life's problems

- *Time* has labelled **Second Life** one of the **five worst websites** because of its user-unfriendliness, and has called Fortune 500 companies' forays into the world 'a case of some chief executives trying too hard to be hip'.
- While Second Life claims to have about **8m** residents, **Linden Lab**, which owns the site, stated that in

- June, the number of Second Life avatars created by distinct individuals was about **4m**. Of those, only about **1m** had logged on in the previous **30 days**.
- Brands on Second Life, meanwhile, have suffered from **pranks and vandalism**. In April, a

helicopter crashed into a **Nissan** building, starting a fire that left a couple of dead bodies.

- **American Apparel** is all but shuttering its Second Life shop, which attracted more critics than shoppers – not long after it opened, the Second Life Liberation Army shot its customers with virtual guns.