DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM THROUGH VIRTUAL WORLDS

RITA J. KING • JOSHUA S. FOUTS

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The Flickr Gettr searches keywords on the photo-sharing website Flickr and displays images in a virtual ether around one's avatar. It was designed by digital artist John Fillwalk (known in Second Life as Mencius Watts), director of the Institute for Digital Intermedia Arts and associate professor of electronic art at Ball State University.

Joel H. Rosenthal
Igniting the Moral Imagination

The Carnegie Council is made of bricks and mortar. Yet, in recent years we have attempted to transcend the confines of our New York City headquarters. Planting our flag online in the form of websites, blogs, YouTube videos, and iTunes podcasts has led us to make connections with some unexpected, even unconventional partners.

But this is the new, networked world we live in. Call it Ethics 2.0.

In my many discussions with Joshua Fouts and Rita J. King over the course of the last year, I have often been reminded of an observation by the great British historian and author Arnold J. Toynbee. "Apathy can be overcome by enthusiasm," he declared, "and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal, which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice."

It has long been the Council's mission to harness the power of ideals such as freedom and justice in ways that ignite the moral imagination. With this report, Josh and Rita have illuminated a new path–a definite intelligible plan–for practical public diplomacy in an area of supreme urgency. Furthermore, they have done so by elevating humanity's most distinguishing feature: the imagination.

Enthusiastically adventuring into the virtual frontier of Second Life, a space where identity can be separated from the binding limitations of geography, culture, and religion, Rita and Josh have planted their flag in the name of public diplomacy. Visitors to this new landscape are afforded the freedom to explore, the opportunity to connect, and, as Josh and Rita demonstrate, an outlet for political frustrations.

The Carnegie Council is committed to supporting policy entrepreneurs like Josh and Rita, even if it means following them into unfamiliar lands like Second Life. I commend them for their effort. I applaud their doggedness in attempting to liberate the Internet's potential as a force for cultural dialogue, and I look forward to the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report.

Joel H. Rosenthal
President, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs
New York City
December 18, 2008

Joshua S. Fouts
Texting with Tel Aviv

In January 1991, I had my first epiphany about the potential of the Internet to change the world.

A fellow graduate student introduced me to Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a real-time Internet chat tool that allows for conversations with people around the world. I was hooked, despite the interface being exclusively text-based at that time. I frequently visited IRC "rooms" to discuss current news and events with people outside the United States. Saddam Hussein had recently invaded Kuwait and the crisis was beginning to escalate. There was talk that he would bomb Israel. My updates about the invasion came from students in Tel Aviv who told me, via IRC, about Scud missiles landing in their city as it was happening.

This experience cemented my perspective on how Internet technology was going to impact the way people around the world would learn about each other. I wanted to be a part of using communications technologies to build dialogue and understanding.

I spent a year working with Ambassador David Abshire shortly after his return from NATO in 1990. Inspired by this experience, I set a course to work at the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), the State Department's cultural outreach entity.

I landed, as it happened, at the broadcasting bureau of the agency, which contained, among other entities, the Voice of America (VOA). I speak Portuguese and was assigned to work in the Brazilian Service. I made it a priority as soon as I arrived to find out if there was a way to access the Internet. No one seemed to know the answer. The staple computer that USIA used (as a part of the State Department) was a so-called "Wang" computer, a text-based beast that emitted a mind-altering green hue. It did not connect to the Internet. VOA, on the other hand, created its own computer services division to manage the unique demands of broadcasting in 52 different languages. The broadcasters, it turned out, had their own computers–with Internet access.

When President Clinton was elected, I was assigned to work for the new VOA director, Geoff Cowan. One of the most exciting projects was to stream VOA audio over the Internet. I still remember when Rob Glaser came to visit VOA in 1993. Rob was launching his company, Real Audio. Three years later he would hire Philip Rosedale to be his Chief Technology Officer. Philip would later found Linden Labs, which created the virtual world Second Life.

My experience working within the U.S. government was enlightening. It illustrated how people with innovative ideas and a drive to change could creatively approach problem-solving. It also revealed how the slow nature of bureaucratic culture could be a serious detriment to progress. Modern diplomacy requires flexibility and the agility to avoid outdated habits and perceptions.

Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds documents how we saw people using the Internet as an experimental venue in which to create meaningful social change in ways that have never been possible in human history–until now.

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Joshua S. Fouts
Senior Fellow, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs
Senior Fellow, Digital Media and Public Policy, The Center for the Study of the Presidency
Chief Global Strategist, Dancing Ink Productions

Rita J. King
The Creation of Eureka Dejavu

One day over lunch in November 2006, a friend of mine who works for IBM suggested that I look into a virtual world called Second Life. I had just spent six months investigating post-Katrina corporate profiteering in the Gulf Coast. My mind was still on crony contracting, environmental hazards, unpaid labor, and lives destroyed by natural disaster and pounded by corruption. I had no idea what he was talking about. Avatars? A virtual *economy*? User-created content? Who has time for this, I wondered, with so many things to experience and tackle in the physical world?

But I was intrigued. I had worked at America Online for a handful of months in 1996, an experience that was later documented in a cover story for the *Village Voice*, "Terms of Service, Sweaty Scenes from the Life of an AOL Censor." With that article, I explored the relationship between ethics and digital anonymity. Over the course of a decade, I watched with interest as the concept of digital anonymity evolved-but I didn't realize that it had shifted so irrevocably into the creative construction of a "virtual identity." In the AOL days, you either *were* or *were not* who you claimed to be. Now, that distinction is not so clear.

So, shortly after lunch that day my avatar Eureka Dejavu was born; a generic newbie in a strange new world, her name chosen from a list. Within a week, she started to visit churches, temples, and mosques. One day she met a Muslim woman in a Jewish synagogue, and they had a discussion about how the woman had always been curious about what goes on during Jewish prayer services but feared being persecuted or making people uncomfortable.

As she described the fulfillment of her wish to participate in other cultures, I realized that this was not "Eureka Dejavu" having a conversation. This was me, meeting the mind of another person, a Muslim woman, alive, at that moment, at some particular latitude and longitude in the physical world, while our digital avatars stood among the flickering wicks and flames of virtual candles.

This experience was, in part, what led me to the "Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds" project. It was the first of many such moments that catalyzed a realization: Experimental immersion in three-dimensional virtual worlds can provide accelerated solutions to problems in the physical world by allowing the global citizenry to connect in real time and create content that can be not only inhabited by others, but also transformed.

Rita J. King
Senior Fellow, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs CEO and Creative Director, Dancing Ink Productions
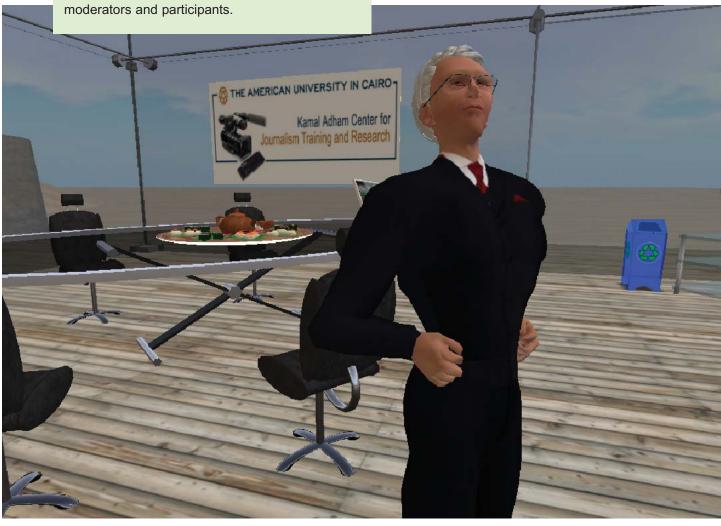
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On December 1, 2008, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman gave a speech at an event hosted by Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation. A small crowd gathered in Washington, D.C., and a global audience watched the live webcast. Under Secretary Glassman outlined a plan he calls "Public Diplomacy 2.0," or PD 2.0. Steve Clemons called it Facebook/Twitter Diplomacy. We call it Digital Diplomacy.

Glassman explained that his job is to act as the government-wide lead in strategic communications, also known as the "war of ideas." In the war of ideas, he said, the current core task is to create an environment hostile to violent extremism.

"We do that in two ways: by undermining extremist ideologies and by encouraging young people to follow productive paths that lead away from terrorism," Glassman said. "The Internet world of al Qaeda is one of direction: believe this, do that. The Internet world of today is one of interactivity and conversation: I think this, your ideas are unconvincing, I need more information to make up my mind, let's meet at 3 p.m. Thursday for a peaceful

Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman, shown at the Virtual Newsroom of the American University in Cairo (a collaborative project with Dancing Ink Productions funded by USAID). Glassman engaged in a conversation in Second Life with eight Egyptian political bloggers who had covered the American presidential election, and the event was webcast live to an Internet audience that could communicate in real-time chat with the moderators and participants.

protest. In fact, the Internet itself is becoming the locus of Civil Society 2.0. This new virtual world is democratic..."

PD 2.0 is an approach, Glassman said, not a technology, but "new technology is absolutely necessary to its success." We call this era the Imagination Age, which is characterized by a shift away from acts of collaborative destruction and marginalized creativity toward acts of collaborative creativity and marginalized destruction through the virtual world of the Internet. Virtual interactions, while they involve real people, do not involve physical contact and therefore provide a medium for exploring productive ways to channel conflict (and the anxiety created by change) without the threat of violence and intimidation. Additionally, the Internet gives individuals a chance to be highly creative while strengthening the relationship between local and global communities.

Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds specifically endeavored to consider how the Internet can lead to a greater firsthand understanding of Islam for policymakers, diplomats, and people worldwide, and to explore how the Internet allows people to experience the culture of Islam in a manner conducive to substantive dialog between cultures. This policy report is part of a trilogy of products designed to explain an environment that is still unfamiliar to most people. A graphic book is available and a short documentary video shot in Second Life can be viewed at www.youtube.com/dancinginktv. These three approaches are meant to capture different aspects of the truly unique individuals and communities that we discovered.

The conclusions presented in this report are the result of nearly a year of research across the Internet, which we consider to be one virtual world fed by countless Web sites. These include Twitter, Skype, FriendFeed, LinkedIn, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, Activeworlds, countless blogs, YouTube, Ning, massively multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft, and virtual worlds like Second Life, a three-dimensional Internet environment that enables users to create

unique content and virtual representations of themselves to interact with one another in a variety of voice, mixed media, text, and chat-based ways.

> *The Economist* posits that stale 19th century diplomacy strategies are among the biggest challenges that President Obama will inherit as a 21st century "Internet" president. Virtual worlds offer an opportunity for a rapid, cost-effective upgrade

Originally, we planned to host and document a series of events in the virtual world of Second Life during which speakers would discuss issues related to Islam. We realized right away that it would be far more intriguing to study what people were already doing. While Second Life is not a game, it can still be quest-based like many games (and life in the physical world). Then the study became an experiment: full participatory immersion in completely unfamiliar terrain.

Our intent was neither to focus on nor promote Second Life to the exclusion of other immersive platforms, however Second Life with its more than 16 million registered users and disproportionately non-U.S. membership proved to be the most international and flexible environment, providing the opportunity for unique user-created content. In the course of researching this report, other virtual worlds appeared, including virtual worlds with a Muslim-only focus, such as the U.K.-based Muxlim Pal.

Second Life, however, provided the best opportunity to explore new strategies for public diplomacy because is was already established enough for residents to have built global communities. While this report is not intended to debate what public diplomacy's priorities should or should not be, we are sensitive to the ongoing discussion. The November 2008 Brookings Institution report "Voices of

America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century" received criticism for not emphasizing public diplomacy's role in countering radical Islam. Kristin Lord, the report's author, offered a measured counterpoint: "Public diplomacy, an instrument of statecraft akin to military force or economic influence, should be applied to serve that full range of strategic and tactical ends. As important as it may be, countering radical ideologies is just one of them."

We have no illusions that radical Islamists are going to reverse course because Second Life has appeared. However, as part of a broader public diplomacy strategy, engaging and interacting with people in virtual worlds who self-identify as Muslim can contribute to a well-developed and inclusive perspective on religion, society, and democratic coexistence, which serves to undermine conditions that can lead to radical views and violent actions. The interviews and communities we encountered illustrate the rich potential for transformation.

We discovered thriving communities of people sharing the experience of what it means to be Muslim all over the world in 2008. We learned about the depth of the spiritual commitment required for authentic practice of Islam and the challenges of dealing with the damage done by extremists while simultaneously trying to meaningfully participate in a changing global culture and economy.

We met people from England, the United States, Libya, France, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, the Netherlands, Germany, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Qatar, Portugal, Canada, Mexico, the Russian province of north Ossetia, Indonesia, South Africa, Morocco, Japan, Israel, Jordan, Italy, and Spain. They took us into their virtual communities, houses, and mosques, invited us to fatwas, took us on a virtual hajj to Mecca, and discussed their perceptions of extremism, integration, creative collaboration, and cultural values. As they shared their stories with us, they knew that we were creating a story of our own that included them as characters. We photographed them, interviewed them, planned multiple meetings across time zones, and

discussed the economy, war, peace, religion, politics, women's rights, civil rights, justice, ethics, terrorism, and social evolution. This wasn't our plan in the beginning, but it illustrates how quickly the virtual world offers opportunities for organic creative development.

While working on this project we traveled to four continents in the physical world to give presentations and participate in summits on the cultural and economic ramifications of the new global culture. Every place we visited taught us about a different aspect of Islam around the world. There is a kaleidoscopic array of Islamic interpretations in Europe, Southeast Asia, the United States, and the Middle East.

Our findings do not recommend replacing physical world activities with virtual ones, but rather supplementing the critical experiential element that is found so richly in exchange programs and sponsored professional visits. We can draw on the art, creativity, and interaction of individuals in the virtual world and take what they've learned into the physical world. Government has a key role to play in this, but only if it understands that communication paradigms have changed.

Just as the Obama campaign engaged community movements, government must understand that foreign policy, public diplomacy, and strategic communication are no longer determined solely by engagement with traditional elites in the "physical" world. The Internet has become a great equalizer in the information hierarchy. As University of Southern California communication professor Jonathan Taplin wrote recently, information is no longer controlled in a "centralized, hierarchical, 'top-down'" manner. Instead, information now flows in a "decentralized, networked, 'bottom-up'" current.

ENGAGING MUSLIMS THROUGH DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

Billions of people around the world are learning to maximize use of the Internet and mobile devices to communicate. How can we reach out with our culture to engage other cultures so that they can better understand us? How can we make ourselves more available and open so that other cultures can help us to understand them? One way that policymakers can do this is through investment in Digital Diplomacy.

In 1999, the United States effectively dismantled the centralized government arm for cultural outreach–the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). The remaining parts of what was once USIA (with the exception of international broadcasting, which was spun off under its own regulatory oversight board, the Broadcasting Board of Governors) were folded into the Department of State under the umbrella of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The public diplomacy budget was slashed. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, a renewed interest in public diplomacy appeared along with numerous reports calling for increased public diplomacy spending. The first and most visible of these reports, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World," a research effort led by former U.S. Ambassador Edward Djerejian and released in October 2003, recommended increased spending on public diplomacy to improve U.S.-Arab relations. Since then, no substantive budgetary increases have occurred.

In fact, disproportionate investment in defense spending has only increased. Brookings Institution Fellow Kristin Lord writes in an October 2008 commentary in the *Christian Science Monitor* that the "Department of Defense will pay private contractors $300 million over three years to produce news and entertainment programs for the Iraqi public." This funding for one region of the world is "equivalent to roughly one-eighth of the State Department's entire public diplomacy budget for the entire world." The Defense Department typically refers to its non-warfare work as "strategic communication," in what could broadly be considered the public diplomacy arena.

While U.S. spending on public diplomacy has largely stagnated, public diplomacy investment by U.S. allies has not. Europe has traditionally been on the forefront of government-subsidized cultural promotion. France, for example, spends around $17 per capita versus the United States, which spends around $0.70 per person on cultural outreach and promotion. Both

In a November 2008 report from the Heritage Foundation, "Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century," authors Tony Blankley, Helle C. Dale, and Oliver Horn list "Inability to Use Modern Communications Tactics" as one of the problems with U.S. public diplomacy. They explain:

"The State Department has been slow to adopt new communications techniques and technologies that are regularly exploited by the commercial sector and often by U.S. adversaries. In 2007, the GAO reported that the State Department failed to evaluate the impact of its communications efforts on target audiences. Instead of polling target groups and analyzing focus group data to determine which messages would resonate, 'State's measurement efforts rely on anecdotal evidence and program outputs, such as favorable articles by foreign journalists.'"

France and England provide subsidies to films–and recently video games–that promote their respective cultures.

Meanwhile, the United States is home to what is widely considered to be the most robust cultural export in the world: Hollywood. As an industry, Hollywood is bound to the market, not to cultural development, and does not attempt to incentivize or subsidize arts and culture in entertainment in any substantive way.

On December 1, 2008, the *New York Times* published "World Falls for American Media, Even as It Sours on America." The article revealed that a delegation of high-level media executives, including the heads of every major film studio, started meeting with Karl Rove shortly after the attacks on 9/11 to discuss ways that the entertainment industry could play a part in improving the image of the United States overseas. "One of the central ideas of the meetings was using 'soft power' by spreading American television and movies to foreign audiences, especially in the Muslim world to help sway public opinion," according to reporter Tim Arango. "There were few tangible results from the meetings."

In their 2008 report, "Mightier than the Sword: Arts and Culture in the U.S.-Muslim World Relationship," Ambassador Cynthia P. Schneider and Kristina Nelson make the case for investing in the development of cultural mixed media projects:

"Arts and culture, with their capacity to move and persuade audiences and to shape and reveal identities, have untapped potential for increasing understanding, knowledge and respect between the United States and the global Muslim community. Artistic and cultural representations–whether they take the form of a play, a TV reality show, a novel, or hip-hop music–challenge traditional stereotypes associated with another culture and humanize 'the other.' Thus, investing in arts and culture has the potential to ameliorate the disintegrating relations between the United States and the Muslim world."

Muslima Questi (avatar name), a 21-year-old Muslim woman from Syria living in the United Arab Emirates, built the Ummah of Noor mosque in Second Life. She started off using the Internet to find information about Islam and Muslims. In Second Life, she has become a source of information. "I came to Second Life to meet other religions–to seek out a different view of the world. Islam was the best choice for me. My goal is to display as much as I can for the others if they're interested."

In various Muslim-oriented communities that we visited in Second Life, we encountered people who did not self-identify as Muslim. Such individuals usually expressed interest in learning more about Islam. A few said they attended Muslim-based events to "keep tabs" on the expansion of Islam. Some reported that they had not met a Muslim or explored Islam at all until Second Life. We attended multiple events in Second Life at which non-Muslims from all over the world questioned Muslim clerics, scholars, and other professionals and residents about the Koran and other sensitive issues. Well-moderated

discussions were consistently informative. On a few occasions an avatar was muted, booted, or banned from an event. A "sim" is a virtual piece of Second Life land, and a sim owner or manager has the power to ban avatars. Conversation participants can mute a particular speaker.

According to Nic Mitham, CEO of the virtual worlds consultancy company KZero, an estimated 300 million people globally are immersed in environments that could be considered virtual worlds. Others place the number higher or lower, depending on whether certain mobile technologies or games are counted in the mix.

Just as foreign exchange programs offer future leaders a chance to absorb and implement cultural diversity, virtual worlds like Second Life offer a completely new way to create meaningful interactions across perceived physical boundaries of gender, age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Stepping out of their physical bodies allows young Muslims to candidly reflect on the role of religion in politics. Members of a growing demographic of self-identified "secular thinkers" were featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on September 19, 2008, in Jeffrey Fleishman's article "Facebook reflects struggle over Islam's role."

Fleischman writes: "His fingers tapping like a tiny army over laptop keys, Waleed Korayem, a university student, skims the Internet in a noisy cafe and opens his Facebook group, the one that drives Islamists into fits of rage: Yeah, We Are Seculars and We Are Proud!"

Fleischman reports that the student was sweating as he clicked through "cyberspace venom and passionate screeds" of Muslims debating Islam and democracy in the Middle East. This electronic "parallel world," he writes, has "given young Muslims a voice beyond their mosques and repressive governments."

"This is not just a technical war, but a moral one," Korayem told Fleishman. "Facebook is reflecting what's happening in Muslim society. I'm engaged in dialogue between Islamists and secularists. But there's too much tension. No one wants to revise his opinions. It's turned into a screaming war."
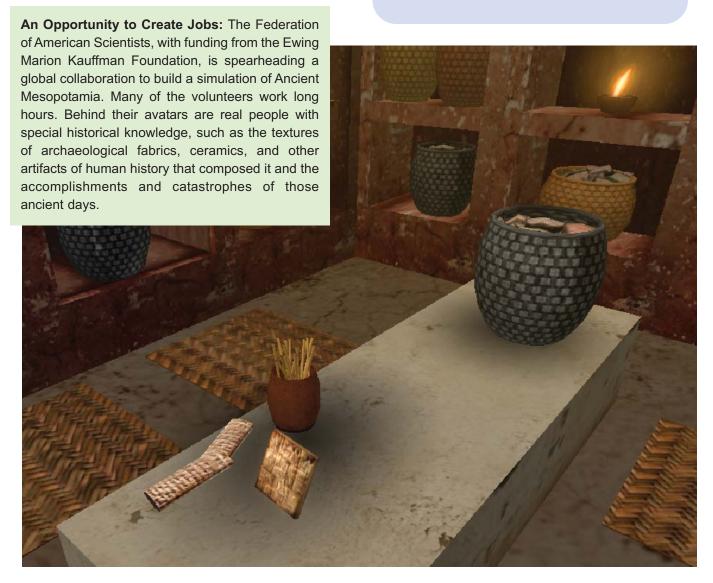
According to Fleischman, Korayem "believes he's living in a transformative time in Islamic history, when a new generation can express whatever it wants on screens that can hold infinite numbers of words. It's exciting, but he wonders where it's going. Is it chatter and discourse in a vacuum, provocative but not powerful enough to overturn oppressive governments or contemporize religious thought?"

SECOND LIFE CASE STUDIES IN CULTURE COLLABORATION, AND COMMUNITY

Ancient Mesopotamia: Where writing was invented

The Middle East is where written human history began. We visited a virtual recreation of Ancient Mesopotamia (which includes present-day Iraq in the physical world). A beautifully textured, candlelit archive room is filled with baskets of etched stone tablets. Alice Petty, an archaeologist and consultant with Federation of American Scientists (FAS) , took us for a tour and explained that real tablets are found around the world and scanned by FAS.

The virtual tablets are scripted with links to multi-platform primary materials so that researchers can

"I would just love for when people hear about Iraq for there to be some image that comes into their minds other than an unjust war," Petty said, "other than the quagmire... other than the violence... other than the sense of frustration. I would love for people to think about civilization, and writing and artistry and culture and language and real people and real heritage that belongs to all of us. I would love people to feel a kinship and ownership for Iraqi cultural heritage."

An Opportunity to Create Jobs: The Federation of American Scientists, with funding from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, is spearheading a global collaboration to build a simulation of Ancient Mesopotamia. Many of the volunteers work long hours. Behind their avatars are real people with special historical knowledge, such as the textures of archaeological fabrics, ceramics, and other artifacts of human history that composed it and the accomplishments and catastrophes of those ancient days.

share their findings and viewers can understand more about where the ancient tablets were found and what messages they might contain.

Culture and economy, transforming in tandem

As the global economy undergoes a massive transformation, Gallup CEO Jim Clifton said the world's 1.4 billion Muslims aren't thinking first about religion, family, or world peace, but rather about "meaningful work." We consistently found this to be true in Second Life. No matter what a person is doing or where he or she lives, one's culture is always tied to one's economic circumstances. That is one of the

most important stories people are telling one another in virtual worlds.

Fortune 500 company Manpower Inc. (a world leader in the employment services industry) has a virtual office, as well as physical branches in 80 different global labor markets. The company recently expanded into multiple markets in the Middle East. We interviewed their senior vice president of global workforce strategy, Tammy Johns, who said that Manpower regards Second Life just as it would any emerging labor market.

Jeffrey Joerres, chairman and CEO of Manpower, said, "The vast potential and ongoing development in

Jeffrey Joerres, the CEO and Chairman of Manpower Inc. speaking through his avatar.

The virtual hajj to Mecca is for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

the Middle East makes this emerging economy an attractive market for many companies. However, the local population does not have the skills required or the demographic numbers to fill job vacancies. Manpower focuses on developing programs with our clients and governments to help them find the talent they need in a socially responsible way."

"The virtualization of the labor market is a key issue for all these groups," he said, "as the world of virtual work is morphing into something that will become very productive and an integral part of how companies get work done. The virtual labor market is similar to emerging labor markets in many countries of the world, facing many of the same infrastructure challenges as it develops and matures."

Virtual worlds provide a multicultural atmosphere, improved access, and flexibility for geographically dispersed workforces. Many of the Muslims we interviewed reported belonging to the second generation of an immigrant family displaced by economic and cultural upheaval. Virtual work

provides stability for an increasingly mobile global workforce.

The virtual hajj to Mecca

Islamonline.net has developed a Second Life simulation of the annual hajj to Mecca, which uses informational note cards to lead pilgrims through the symbolic importance of the journey. The sim also provides all of the necessary clothing, accoutrements, and animations (such as for prayer) in a virtual representation.

The first time we visited the virtual hajj we met two avatars, one from the United States who said he has an "Arabic root" and the other from the volatile North Caucasus region in Russia.

When we first met the two men, we offered them both friendship. Second Life has a social networking aspect where you can offer friendship and be instantly "accepted" or "declined." We were unceremoniously rejected. Nevertheless, we got into a conversation

ONE OF THE DISCUSSIONS WE HAVE IS ABOUT WHETHER IT'S DISRESPECTFUL TO WEAR SHOES IN A VIRTUAL MOSQUE.

Rose Springvale is the sultana of Al-Andalus. After the attacks of 9/11, she and her family wanted to learn more about Islam.

touching on the subject of "ijtihad" (the critical thought component of Islam).

Ingush, the avatar from North Caucasus, became upset when he mistakenly interpreted the question to be about "jihad." Dialogue with Westerners is "almost impossible," he said, because the subject of jihad always comes up so soon. When we suggested that he read back through the chat log, he did, and he apologized for jumping to the wrong conclusion. We apologized for underestimating the language barrier and offered both avatars friendship again. This time they accepted. The interaction was illustrative of the way sensitive conversations can take place in a virtual world, where the potential to mitigate tension is such that conflict can become a catalyst for social change instead of escalating unchecked toward violence.

An experiment in Islamic democracy: Al-Andalus

We climbed aboard a magic carpet ride for a tour of

Al-Andalus, an experimental democracy with Islamic principles. Our guide was the local sultana, Rose Springvale–in the physical world she is a Methodist, originally from Indiana, who works as an attorney based in Texas. Al-Andalus seeks to emulate 13th century Andalusia, a region of present-day Spain that was ruled by Muslims at various times between 711 and 1492. Al-Andalus operates as a democracy built on Islamic principles, with living quarters for Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

As we flew above Al-Andalus, we gathered information about what we were seeing from informational note cards:

Andalusia represents a lesson for us today as we confront globalization, which needs to take place against a background of enlightened social relations and the universal ethical values in which humanity has its roots and without which it

cannot survive... Al-Andalus' aim is to rethink what it means to be an active citizen in a 21st century democracy.

The following information is excerpted from a note card given to avatars at the entrance of the Muslim quarter (Dar al-Islam) in Al-Andalus:

> The crystallization of a distinctively Andalusi Islamic culture was ultimately dependent upon the process of conversion. As a progressively higher proportion of the population became Muslim, institutions and activities of Islamic orientation came to dominate the culture. Since such activities were predicated upon a certain density of Muslims, these are also benchmarks in the process of crystallization and serve as an indirect check on the progress of the conversion movement.

Al-Andalus seeks to put the fate of its future in the hands of its citizens. This is accomplished in part by a roster of programs, lectures, classes, performances, and social gatherings. Transparently developing and documenting such experiments is a valuable process because it creates opportunities for debate about the interpretation not only of Islamic principles, but also of cultural integration in a wider sense.

Debate exists in the virtual world about how to interpret respect. One of most interesting examples is the "no shoes in the mosque" rule. A 20-year convert to Islam guards one of the mosques at Al-Andalus, insisting that visitors remove their shoes (other people we met insisted that women should don virtual veils in some mosques). Some see the removal of shoes in the virtual mosque as a necessary gesture of respect and others see it as absurd, since virtual soles gather no road dust.

Complicating matters further is the fact that taking off one's shoes in Second Life is easy enough-you click on them and remove them. Finding them later in an overstuffed inventory of digital garments, however, can be a time-consuming, and thus very real, nuisance. This raises intriguing questions about what

"respect" is, and how the concept might evolve along with global culture.

From spectator to community leader

Muslima Questi is a 21-year-old Muslim woman from Syria living in the United Arab Emirates. While working on this project we watched her create and grow an online community. We first met her at the "Religions of the Future: Future of Religions" conference hosted in Second Life by the "Extropia" community, where she told us she was interested in starting a discussion group.

Almost immediately after this event, she contacted us to excitedly share the news that she was going to have a discussion about "rapists and rape victims in Islam" in Second Life. Furthermore, the event would be held on her new sim, Ummah of Noor, where she had already constructed a mosque, a living space for herself, and a community space for discussions.

When we asked if she planned to have any experts in attendance, or if any speakers with expertise were being featured, she said no. We had no idea what to expect when we took our virtual seats and Muslima reassured us in chat that a civilized discussion would follow. People from Syria, Spain, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States proved her right.

Virtual fatwas

We attended a number of meetings and events at which experts, scholars and clerics presented information and held discussions about issues related

> **What each must seek in his life never was on land or sea. It is something out of his own unique potentiality for experience, something that never has been and never could have been experienced by anyone else. –Joseph Campbell**

to Islam, including interpretation of the Koran. One such event was identified ahead of time as a "fatwa." We were given a copy of the entire Koran in Second Life. When people gather to discuss interpretations of the Koran, various views arise. We were witness to many conversations that produced thoughtful points raised during respectful conversation. We also witnessed belligerent or aggressive individuals attempting to dominate conversations, but such individuals were rarely tolerated for long. Occasionally they were banned, some hastily in our opinion.

In many communities, we experienced a blurring of the line between "real" and "virtual" identity. Digital anonymity creates a roster of benefits and challenges, and new concepts of identity and community are arising as a result.

Sandra Kearney, IBM's global director of research, pointed out the usefulness of applying a concept called the Johari Window to the interpretation of and participation in identity construction, such as that seen in the development of one's Internet presence or profile within platforms. The Johari Window has four panes that help people better understand communication and relationships–open, hidden, blind, and unknown. These four panes represent a dynamic process.

The open quadrant represents "things that both I know about myself and you know about me." The blind quadrant represents "things that you know about me, but that I am unaware of." The hidden quadrant represents "things I know about myself that you do not know." The unknown quadrant represents "things that I neither know about myself, nor you about me."

Being placed in new situations shakes the quadrants up. In the virtual world, people play with the panes. New information previously not known to self or others emerges.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Immersive storytelling abounds

People are using virtual worlds to tell stories about religion, culture, and themselves. In Islam, these elements are closely related. Unlike television or other passive forms of entertainment, immersion in creative narratives allows people to participate in the formation of a new global story and to become protagonists in an active narrative that evolves through participation.

Immersive storytelling is a powerful medium. Meaningful use of virtual worlds can foster the agility needed to navigate a changing culture while offering a significant chance to celebrate and share that which is unique and irreplaceable.

On November 18, 2008, MIT Media Lab announced creation of the Center for Future Storytelling, funded through a seven-year, $25-million commitment from Plymouth Rock Studios, a new movie and television studio opening in 2010 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The mission is "to transform audiences into active participants in the storytelling process, bridging the real and virtual worlds, and allowing everyone to make their own unique stories with user-generated content on the Web," including virtual-world storytelling.

Major players like Disney and Viacom already use virtual worlds to extend their franchises, noted MIT Media Lab. (Viacom started MTV Arabia in fall of 2007 and Nickelodeon Arabia in July 2008.) Others, like the BBC and the SciFi channel, are experimenting with virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) that allow for more interaction with television programs or that evolve alongside them. Another large media company is working with Virtual Italian Parks on virtual-world-enabled, user-created movies.

The Internet has changed the way key influencers appear and develop

One classic debate in public diplomacy centers on whether to target elites or the masses. The intent behind targeting elites is that they are key influencers who will subsequently have an impact on the masses. Exchange programs are an excellent example of this. The U.S. State Department regularly points to the elites they have sponsored for exchange programs who later became key influencers, including Margaret Thatcher, Anwar Sadat, Hamid Karzai, and Tony Blair. However, venues for identifying key influencers are changing quickly. It is necessary to be tech savvy in order to identify new leaders and to correctly interpret the value of various Internet platforms.

Even the most wildly popular platforms can quickly lose relevance. Trends come and go, influenced by the collective digital culture in real time. A multi-platform approach, such as that employed by the Federation of American Scientists, can retain relevance and appeal across sectors and demographics.

In October 2006, Second Life hit a million registered residents. By December 2008, the total was over 16 million. It is unclear how many "residents" regularly use Second Life. Many registered accounts belong to people who may have stagnated at Orientation Island, never to return–the entry point into Second Life is notoriously lackluster. But peak concurrency for Second Life (the number of people logged in at the same time) continues to rise–going from 70,000 concurrent users in September 2008 to 75,000 in November 2008, according to Second Life journalist and author Wagner James Au, editor of New World Notes.

According to the Second Life website, the United States has the highest number of Second Life users worldwide, comprising 30 percent of the entire population, with Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Brazil–all of which have Muslim populations–filling out the rest of the top five

> **Reality is only an illusion–though a most persistent one. –Albert Einstein**

countries. It is important to note that while no Middle East country has more than 1 percent of the users per country, this report is not focused on Muslims in the Middle East, but rather Muslims in virtual worlds. Muslims account for approximately 20 percent of the world population, according to a March 2008 study in the *Guardian* newspaper.

Bureaucratic stovepipes no longer apply

Of central concern to public diplomacy practitioners is whether "the message" can or should be controlled. Information is no longer controllable in a top-down, hierarchical manner. In fact, it's the reverse–information now flows non-hierarchically from the bottom up. Public diplomacy and strategic communications must learn to adapt to this new communication and creative flow paradigm. Key influencers evolve rapidly and organically on the Internet. Public diplomacy must be prepared to engage these communities in a nimble, non-bureaucratic way.

Recommendations

Expand and empower digital diplomacy efforts

In the last year, the State Department has boldly tested the use of the Internet for outreach by using blogs and even Twitter. Momentum must not be lost. President Obama revolutionized the concept of a presidential campaign by harnessing the power of the Internet. Tomorrow's Foreign Service Officers in public diplomacy must be prepared to conduct a significant portion of their research and networking in the virtual world of the Internet. Young leaders must be engaged in their communities, both virtual and physical. While we do not recommend replacing traditional public diplomacy efforts with digital diplomacy strategies, as James Glassman noted on December 1, 2008, "Any government that resists new Internet techniques faces a greater risk: being ignored."

Augment exchange programs by adding a virtual component

One challenge that all exchange programs face is what happens after the person returns to their home country. Virtual environments offer a cost-effective way to maintain and cultivate these relationships.

Increasingly, sophisticated virtual platforms allow people to experience unfamiliar customs and ideas without the time and resources associated with travel in the physical world. While there is no replacement for physical immersion in a culture, travel is often contingent on resources, which limits these opportunities to smaller segments of the population. Virtual exchange programs can be tailored to radically change the manner in which people relate to one another and view global culture.

Government, foundations, and civil society should consider supporting the cost-effective, transformative potential of virtual worlds as a way of expanding the long-term impact of their exchange programs. Virtual worlds are an ideal, inexpensive, resource-saving medium where meetings and training sessions can occur and information can be shared.

Organizations such as Meridian International (the nation's premier nonprofit institution dedicated exclusively to public diplomacy and global engagement) have hosted groundbreaking events bringing leading thinkers together to transform public and private sector partnerships through technology. We met with Meridian International at various times throughout the duration of this project and found that, like many venerable institutions that facilitate cultural exchanges, they are ready to take cultural dialogue into the digital realm and are actively developing partnerships that demonstrate thought leadership on meaningful public and private sector partnerships for creation of content across platforms. Such content is being created to improve the lives of real people in the physical world who are learning, together, how to broaden the worldwide conversation about what it means to create a new global culture and economy in the Imagination Age.

We believe the Obama Administration has absorbed the foundational principles necessary to focus on effective public diplomacy efforts. In a presidential primary campaign speech, then-Senator Obama outlined his public diplomacy plans (August 1, 2007):

"One component of this integrated approach will be new Mobile Development Teams that bring together personnel from the State Department, the Pentagon, and USAID. These teams will work with civil society and local governments to make an immediate impact in peoples' lives, and to turn the tide against extremism..."

"I will also launch a program of public diplomacy that is a coordinated effort across my Administration, not a small group of political officials at the State Department explaining a misguided war. We will open 'America Houses' in cities across the Islamic world, with Internet, libraries, English lessons, stories of America's Muslims and the strength they add to our country, and vocational programs. Through a new 'America's Voice Corps' we will recruit, train, and send out into the field talented young Americans who can speak with–and listen to–the people who today hear about us only from our enemies..."

"I will make clear that we are not at war with Islam, that we will stand with those who are willing to stand up for their future, and that we need their effort to defeat the prophets of hate and violence. I will speak directly to that child who looks up at that helicopter, and my message will be clear: 'You matter to us. Your future is our future. And our moment is now.'"

These campaign promises reflect an important aspect of how the Internet and virtual worlds can and should be used for outreach efforts to the Middle East and beyond. A global village requires digital diplomacy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Rita J. King is CEO and Creative Director of Dancing Ink Productions, a research, strategy, and content-creation company dedicated to the emergence of a new global culture in the Imagination Age–defined by powerful, creative use of digital technology for sharing meaningful ideas and collaborating on solutions. King is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

She is author of the seminal *Village Voice* cover story, "Terms of Service: Sweaty Scenes from the Life of an AOL Censor." For seven years while working as an award-winning investigative reporter, King's primary focus was reporting on corporate culture and social responsibility. This work culminated in her report "Big, Easy Money: Disaster Profiteering on the American Gulf Coast," which was widely featured internationally. This work was followed by a civil rights quest with the president of the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development across the Deep South to study the American civil rights movement and other universal themes: race and class.

King recently completed a report for IBM, "From the Fire Pit to the Forbidden City: An Outsider's Inside Look at the Evolution of IBM's Virtual Universe Community." Her essay "The Emergence of a New Global Culture in the Imagination Age" was recently published in a book that celebrates the launch of the Transatlantic Network 2020, a youth leadership public diplomacy initiative spearheaded by the British Council to cultivate multimedia connections between young people looking to collaborate on tackling serious global issues.

King is a frequent international speaker on the subject of creative collaboration, ROI in the new global economy, and the creative and economic implications of a new global culture. Dancing Ink Productions has been featured in many publications across the physical and virtual world, from the *New York Times* and CNN to *UgoTrade*, *TIME*, BoingBoing and *Wired*.

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Before joining Dancing Ink Productions, Fouts cofounded and directed the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School; previously he was director and cofounder of the USC Annenberg Online Journalism & Communication program where he also cofounded and was editor of *OJR*, the first Internet-based *Online Journalism Review*. From 1992-1994 he was a Presidential Management Fellow, after which he spent half a decade at the U.S. Department of State and the Voice of America launching numerous new technology and public diplomacy projects. He is on the editorial board of *Place Branding* (Palgrave Macmillan). Fouts is a member of the Public Diplomacy Council.