Communications of the Association for Information Systems

10-5-2007

STA Travel Island: Marketing First Life Travel Services in Second Life

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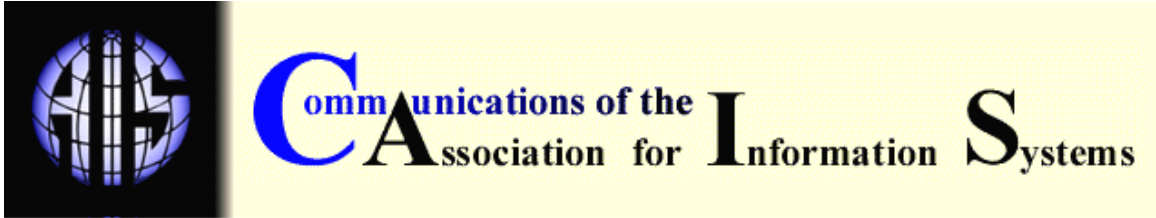Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais

STA TRAVEL ISLAND: MARKETING FIRST LIFE TRAVEL SERVICES IN SECOND LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The case, through the experience of a recent college graduate thrusted in the decision-making spotlight, describes the attempt by the largest student travel agency in the world – STA Travel – to evaluate whether and how to establish a presence in Second Life. Second Life was a fast emerging Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) that was garnering increasing attention from companies around the world.

The STA Travel Island case is appropriate for information systems, marketing, or strategy classes as it explores issues of new technology adoption, value creation and appropriation with Information Systems and with emerging technologies, and project feasibility and management.

(A teaching note is available from the first author to any faculty member listed in the MISRC/ISWorld directory.)

STA TRAVEL ISLAND: MARKETING FIRST LIFE TRAVEL SERVICES IN SECOND LIFE (A)

INTRODUCTION

In January of 2007, Matt Nixon, Director of E-Commerce, STA Travels North America Division, took a final look at the unsigned contract on his desk. The work package described in the contract's appendix was the biggest piece of a nearly six-figure dollar commitment to develop a virtual marketing presence on Second Life, a computer-simulated virtual world.

STA's planned site would include STA Travel Island, as well as a neighboring orientation island designed as an initial landing place for Second Life newcomers; the site would, in addition to orienting newcomers to Second Life (SL), include information on interesting destinations within SL. It would also help promote events related to the real-world, or "first life" destinations, that STA Travel hoped to induce island visitors to and, eventually, help them book travel to.

A second piece of the work package was a blog intended to draw attention to the island, starting first with its construction, and continuing with various travel-related events to be held on the Island. The Electric Sheep Company (ECS), which had already designed a number of high visibility sites on SL, would produce the Island and manage the events. Electronic Artists, a firm specializing in marketing in virtual environments, would produce the blog.

A recent graduate of the hospitality management program at Cornell University, Matt Nixon had spearheaded the initiative and was to present the contract to his senior management that afternoon. He knew there were a number of unanswerable questions about this investment of a sizeable proportion for the U.S. division's limited marketing dollars. Would Second Life continue to grow? Would it pick up steam on the college campuses that housed so many of STA Travel's current and future customers – the way sites like Facebook and MySpace had done when he was a student himself? Could STA Travel design events on the Island that would attract young people? How would they market those events, "in-world"? Could they effectively execute them on the limited budget they had available? Once on the Island, how could visitors be lured back again?

Perhaps the most pressing of all these questions, and the most likely to be asked in the upcoming meeting, was how STA Travel leadership should judge success. Producing a revenue stream from island visitors was not in the initial plan. There would be no travel agency on the island to sell tickets.   But there were already pressures to integrate the firm's products into the Island. Nixon also hoped the island might attract the interest of, and perhaps investments from, the marketing departments in some of the firm's other country units. Such investments could improve both the quality and quantity of the initial events and, perhaps, give the island more time to build a self-sustaining community of SL residents.

STA TRAVEL

STA Travel, a subsidiary of privately held Diethelm Keller Holding Ltd., markets itself as "the world's largest student travel organization helping students travel in over 90 countries." STA Travel specializes in student travel, a market niche accounting for approximately 20 percent of all travel bookings. In 2005 STA Travel reported revenues of 215 million CHF (Swiss Francs) on total transactions of 1,542 CHF, down from 241 on 1539 the previous year. That same year, the firms 2,358 employees working from 375 travel agency offices in 17 countries and through franchises in 83 others, provided travel advice and booking services to approximately 6 million travelers.

Founded in 1979, STA Travel had grown and expanded its global reach through a series of mergers and acquisitions. While the brand was well known in parts of Europe and Australia,

where it had operated for many years, STA Travel's U.S. brand, born with the acquisition in 2003 of Council Travel, was still less well known.

Historically, STA Travel reached its customers through retail travel agencies, many located near or on college campuses. Beginning in the 1990s, however, the Internet brought new online competitors. Among these were Student Universe and Student City as well as less focused online providers of travel services including Travelocity and Expedia. By 2007 the Internet was predicted to account for more bookings than offline alternatives.[1]

To be responsive to their globally dispersed and culturally diverse customer base STA Travel sought to "delegate as much autonomy, responsibility, and authority as close to the action as possible," while using a single integrated information system "to provide global support and solutions when that can improve their experience." They described this philosophy with the following slogan: "as local as possible, as global as necessary." Yet, an evolving business strategy called One Company sought to "align business operations with customer needs across the world." Global teams were charged with developing and delivering "a single supplier strategy, one service standard, one set of operating standards and guidelines for management of our corporate identity." In support of this emerging model the company provided BLUEe, "a single sales and booking system to every STA Travel point of purchase backed by a single network, infrastructure, finance, and reporting system."

To ensure they remained "as local as possible," each major country maintained its own STA Travel sales and marketing arms.   While most country's home Web page was consistent in look and feel, country marketers were each free to design their marketing campaigns including methods to harness the Internet.   The U.S. office, for instance, had run a viral marketing campaign called "body shots," intended to promote spring break in the U.S. They had also initiated advertising on Facebook and MySpace, two sites popular with the demographics desirable to the firm.   The STA Travel U.S. Web site itself was a popular destination, registering some 600,000 unique visitors each month. Over 400,000 customers and prospective customers also contact the U.S. division each month by email.

The STA Travel's North American division had initiated development of STATRAVEL193.COM, a highly interactive Web site featuring video reports from STA customers about travel destinations. They had also been the first to explore the possibilities of Second Life as a marketing tool. The idea had received a welcome endorsement, and a matching investment, from STA Travels headquarters in the U.K. Craig Hepburn, STA Travels Global Webmaster, was responsible for the content management system that fed the various country Web sites and that was being rolled out throughout the world. His team had also supported development of personalized travel blogs that allowed STA Travel customers to document their travel. Hepburn was enthusiastic about SL as a marketing channel but knew it would be met with resistance by the marketing departments in other countries.

SECOND LIFE

Linden Labs, a privately held California firm, created Second Life in 2003. From the Second Life Web site,[2] prospective players could download the client software for the "game."[3] Once online,

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[1]Hospitality   Net,   December   15,   2006, http://www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4029705.search?query=online+travel+bookings+percentage

[2] http://www.secondlife.com

[3] Second Life was an example of a 3-D, Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). Most of the more popular MMORPG, such as World of Warcraft and Guild Wars provided an overarching set of objectives for players. Second Life was different. It was instead, almost literally, a "second life." A place you could travel in, build a house, rent an apartment, start

the player's client software connected to a grid of computer servers, each hosting one small region of the many islands and mainland that constituted SL. For first-time players, that destination had always been SL Orientation Island; First, though new players were walked through a process of establishing a name for their account and a password. They were then given opportunities to provide the initial design of their online persona – their avatar.   The avatar was then revealed to them on the SL orientation island.

From their computer, players could see the back of their avatar as well as nearby people, signs, buildings and so on. By following along a path and reading information posts along the way, new players learned how to make their avatars walk, fly, and tele-transport from one place on the island to another. Orientation Island also provided players with instructions on how to change the appearance of their avatar – for instance, for longer legs, colored hair, makeup, mustaches, and so on. New avatars were also equipped with a complimentary inventory of clothes, vehicles, and so on.[4]

New players were introduced to the basic tools for communicating with one another including instant message and chat capabilities.[5] A radio station broadcasting on Second Life provided entertainment created by SL residents as well as helpful advice, such as how to pay for merchandise in SL. Once a player became comfortable with basic navigation and their persona, he or she could transport to neighboring Help Island. Here were available free clothing, houses, furniture, and animations – for instance, for gestures, dancing, swimming, or hugging. For those with higher aspirations, there were also introductory lessons on building objects, such as houses, or developing simple programs.   Once comfortable in their skills, new "residents" could transport their avatars to the mainland and begin their second lives in earnest.

THE SECOND LIFE ECONOMY

By early January of 2007, well over 3 million residents had registered on SL, up from 1 million less than three months before. 700,000 of those had visited SL in the previous 60 days and 12,000-18,000 were typically online at a particular time. While there was no charge for downloading the SL client or visiting the mainland, there were advantages to becoming a paying member. Premier members received 1,000 Linden dollars, the currency of SL, when they joined and a stipend of L$300 each week for a year. Premier membership cost L$72 per year or L$9.95 per month.   These Linden dollars, as well as others, a player might wish to buy or earn, could then be used to rent an apartment, buy land, shop for clothes, and so on. Nearly $1 million U.S. dollars were being spent in the economy each day. Through currency exchange and a market mechanism Linden dollars were exchangeable for U.S. dollars.

By December of 2006, there was one self-proclaimed millionaire on SL; Ailin Graef, reported having over US$1 million in Second Life assets, most in the form of virtual land which her firm developed and either resold or rented out. A variety of other business, big and small, flourished on Second Life. Any member could set up businesses and many did so. Typical were land

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a business, play in a band, dance in a club, shop, model clothes, work as a dancer, gamble, display art, have virtual sex, or even marry.

[4] The following videos provide a visual description of second life's characteristics and the Second Life experience:

– http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxj8RTW4ev4
– http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=synxFmQJ_0A

[5] While there were plans to allow person-to-person audio in SL, none were yet available. Some SL residents, for instance, teachers and their students, used other programs running in parallel with SL for voice communications.

developers, dance clubs, shops, clothing stores, furniture stores, garden shops, resorts and, of course, a variety of gambling shops as well as destinations with X-rated themes.[6]

More recently, real life (RL) businesses and brands began to explore their own second lives. Among the early arrivals were Toyota, Mazda, Starwood Hotels, IBM, Circuit City, Sears, Dell, Sun Microsystems, MTV, Adidas, American Apparel, PA Consulting, and major league baseball. Various not-for-profit organizations also began exploring the opportunities provided by SL. Among these were a number of universities and the American Cancer Society.   The commercial RL businesses entrance into SL was not always well accepted, with groups such as the SL Liberation Army often "griefing" openings of RL initiatives.

STA TRAVEL'S SECOND LIFE STRATEGY

The initial strategy STA Travel had conceived for their Web presence had two prongs. The first element was to create several destination islands to attract prospective travelers. For instance, one idea was to create an island featuring the Great Wall of China. The second element of the plan was to hold a machinima competition among current Second Life residents. *Machinima*, a style of movie making, used avatars as members of the cast; the movie was then filmed in the context of a virtual world.   The idea was to have Second Life members who had already created exciting virtual worlds create movies to highlight those worlds. STA Travel could then use the best of those videos to provide within Second Life some of the same services they provided in the real world – information about exciting places to visit and information on how to get there.

Another important element was the orientation island. Up until very recently, all newcomers to SL had to go through the orientation island developed by Linden Labs. This was a major barrier to companies that wished to promote their islands on, for instance, corporate Web sites. There had been no way to go straight to the island. Recently, however, Linden Labs had opened up their registration site. Visitors to the island could transport directly there and then register for SL.

With input from Gif Constable, a vice president of ESC, the vision began to mature. The idea of providing a soft landing into SL was retained. Newcomers would come directly to a separate orientation island where they would be provided with basic instruction in mobility, communication, avatar outfitting, and so on. But destination islands would be too difficult to maintain and were felt to be unlikely to attract return visitors. Also, it would put the company in competition with the many interesting homegrown locations created by SL members. Instead, the idea became to have the island play a role quite similar to the one the company played in real life. It would lead people to exciting places in Second Life, thus leveraging one of the weaknesses many players perceived with Second Life – the lack of a useful travel guide. Some of these sites would include the SL versions of RL destinations such as Morocco, Rome, Times Square, Dublin and even the Great Wall of China, which someone had already built in SL. The island would also host a number of events to highlight real-life travel opportunities.

Kristin Celko, the U.S. division's vice president of marketing and e-commerce, and Matt Nixon's boss, would have to approve the contract. She shared some of her reservations with a visitor in December of 2006.

> *My biggest concern is whether we are going too far out there. Will the students see this as cool and attracting? Will we be getting away from the message I want to convey – the right brand image. And, I also worry about how our retail staff will respond. Many of our people are young and full of wanderlust, but can they get their heads around this? These people are paid on commission; what's in it for them?*

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[6] Linden Labs ran a separate version of SL call Teen Second Life. Unlike SL, it had no "mature regions" and a stricter code of conduct. Teen SL members had to be between 13 and 18 years in age.

THE CONTRACT

The contract with ECS included two phases. The first design phase was estimated to take about 14 days. Deliverables would include a one-page, two-dimensional, high-level sketch of the visual elements of the simulation, a one-page visual concept document describing the specific look and feel and other visual attributes of the simulation, and a one-page development plan document including the timeline and acceptance criteria for the subsequent, execution phase.   The execution phase, contingent on client approval of the design phase, would cost approximately 10 times the cost of the design. The contract also included approximately $7,000 in costs for leasing two simulators (SIM) from Linden Labs for six months. ECS estimated that each could accommodate 50 avatars at one time.

One SIM would be used for the orientation island and the second for the STA Travel Island. The island would include the STA Mall, offering free or for-pay virtual goods provided by current SL merchants, a community lounge area, a pavilion for holding the events, and an STA information center; the latter was to provide a variety of information about STA Travel, its various online initiatives, as well as information about some of its travel partners. The contract also called for the management of two events in each of 16 consecutive weeks. The contract described these as "… a mix of tours of SL, show-and-tell contests, trivia contests, live music from local musicians, meet-and-greets, and tutorial sessions."

THE DECISION

Still staring at the unsigned contract on his desk, Matt was undeniably nervous. He had presented to executives many times before, but he had rarely been out on a limb betting on a very new technology. There was still time to pull the plug; no signed contract meant little commitment and resource expenditure to date. His recommendation would likely carry the day at the meeting, but that meant that his reputation was on the line. This decision called for some more careful consideration.

STA TRAVEL ISLAND: MARKETING FIRST LIFE TRAVEL SERVICES IN SECOND LIFE (B)

INTRODUCTION

In February of 2007, STA Travel's North American Division, with financial support from STA Travel's U.K. headquarters, signed contracts to create STA Travel Island on the computer-simulated virtual world called Second Life (SL). Electronic Sheep Company (ESC) would be the primary contractor, responsible for the build the Web portal that would bring people from STA Travel's Web site to the island, and special events to be held on the island. Electronic Artists (EA) would create a Web blog to document the build, bring visibility to the island prior to its opening, and, help to market the site. While ESC would assign a project manager to look after their own elements of the build, Electronic Artists were also contracted to provide some project management expertise.

Matt Nixon would continue to oversee the project for STA Travel. Nixon's challenge was to ensure that island design, and the events planned for the island, would be attractive to prospective customers. The challenge in the short run was to get visitors to come to the island and, hopefully, to return with their friends. Soon, however, he knew the island would also need to generate revenue. He also hoped the island would prove attractive to STA Travel's business partners who might play valuable roles in attracting and retaining visitors.

THE STA TRAVEL ISLAND DESIGN

ESC arranged to buy two islands on SL. One would host STA Travel Island while the other, STA Travel Orientation, would help newcomers orient themselves to SL. STA's Web portal would attract prospective visitors and provide them with information on downloading the SL client software and guide them through the process of selecting their avatars name, password, gender, and initial clothing. New residents would then be transported directly to the STA Travel Orientation Island, where they would master the rudimentary skills necessary to get around in SL. Once trained, visitors could transport themselves to the nearby STA Travel Island and begin exploring SL.

The STA team wanted visitors to return to the island regularly. To motivate return visits, elements of the design promoted the development of the island as a community, not just a destination. Among these were a sandbox where island visitors could build things, dormitory rooms, a calendar of special events, as well as public locations for residents to display their travel stories, photographs, and SL creations, to attend travel-related special events, or just to hook up with SL friends.

The main island, arranged as a hexagon, was to be a series of attractive destinations, each modeled after an interesting real-life attraction. For France, a popular destination for STA Travel customers, there would be a Parisian sidewalk café, complete with candlelit tables, a bit of wine, and loaves of bread still steaming from the oven; the cafe would be an open-air meeting place for island visitors. Another destination, modeled after an Egyptian tomb, would be the Hall of Submissions, where visitors could display their own snapshots of either real or Second life; here too would be a showcase of second life objects created by visitors – for instance, jewelry or apparel for avatars. A Mayan temple, illustrating Mexico, would display travel videos submitted by members. To highlight the United States there was a main street store where visitors could obtain free apparel, such as STA Travel t-shirts and back packs, or buy clothing from some of Second Life's trendier fashion outlets.

The main island also held the STA Travel Office, a large multi-story building with a very open feel. A large reception area could accommodate several STA Travel agents, though, like much of commerce on SL, the initial plan was focused more on self-service. Hanging from the ceilings would be travel posters of tempting locations. Wall signs would list special deals currently

available as well as upcoming activities on the island. Along the walls, shelves were intended to display travel brochures and the like.

Linking each of the buildings in the main island hexagon, were connecting buildings, designed to look like the inside of an airport terminal, with gate signage appropriate for the destinations on either side. Here, and elsewhere in the build, sound was used to further shape the visitor's experience. Parisian music permeated the café while the sounds in the airport segments were those of people talking and gate agents announcing departures.

ORIENTATION ISLAND

Linden Labs had recently begun to permit developers to host their own registration portals and Second Life landing sites, thus permitting newcomers to bypass the main second life orientation island. Initial plans had called for the STA Travel Orientation Island to be laid out as an airport terminal, with different elements of the orientation process (e.g., learning to walk) at particular gates in the terminal. The ESC builders had created a prototype structure for the airport terminal but, prior to creating the orientation stations, the design was reconsidered as one of the ESC executives explained:

> *I take responsibility for this. We had learned a lot about how to do this with our build for The L-Word and I thought it would be best if, rather than redesigning the orientation, that we modify what we had done there. It will be cheaper, leaving us with additional money to spend elsewhere in the build or on special events.*

The L-Word Island was an SL companion to the television show *The L-Word*. ESC's contract to develop the L-World island gave them the freedom to use some elements of the L-Word orientation island design, though the signage, colors, and so on, needed to be extensively modified. Arranged in a circular design, STA Travel's seven orientation stations provided directions on learning to walk, controlling the avatars field of view, carrying out public and private communications, changing appearance, acquiring and putting on clothes, learning about the sandbox and apartments, finding out how to set landmarks and teleport to them, and, in the final station, learning how to teleport to the STA Travel store on the main island.

THE SANDBOX

Sandboxes were locations in SL where people who did not own land could practice their building skills. It was also a place to look at the many items, such as houses or vehicles, which SL residents accumulated in their personal inventories. Sandboxes were popular and in high demand. To attract return visitors, STA Travel Island would host such a sandbox. To avoid clutter and overloading the simulator, the sandbox would be automatically cleared every six hours of accumulated builds. Users of the sandbox could ensure their creations were not discarded by periodically saving them to their own inventories, a database of objects associated with every member.

BUILDING THE ISLANDS

ESC assigned a number of designers and scripters to work on the island. Designers created the graphical elements of the design, while scripters added programming functionality – for instance, to ensure doors could open and close. During the build the island was closed to the public. Workers, some from the U.S. and others from the U.K., teleported in and, working in teams or individually, began the construction. The builders, recruited from the legion of self-trained builders operating in the noncommercial areas of SL, were fast and talented. They also had to be good at minimizing lag. If there were too many basic building elements on the island, the simulator would bog down, causing annoying delay, or "lag" as it was commonly called. Before opening the STA

Travel main island, builders had used up approximately two-thirds of the available building elements on the main island.

Too many avatars wandering about a piece of SL could also cause lag. About 40-50 avatars were usually considered as nearing a maximum for a single SL parcel. Scripts also could contribute to lag, though they added much "color" to SL. A script, embedded in a "pose ball" on your dorm couch would, if selected, cause your avatar to sit down in a particular, animated, position – say with legs crossing and uncrossing in some regular pattern. Pose balls were commonly sold in SL, configured for dancing, swimming, diving, kissing, hugging, handholding, and even greater levels of intimacy. Often the color of the pose ball, or object it was embedded in, pink or blue, was a hint for the most likely gender that such a pose would imitate. But to minimize lag, among other reasons, the islands would be set up to prohibit visitors from running imported scripts.

DORMITORY LIFE

Another incentive for repeat visitors was an SL home you could call your own. Most SL visitors, and all newcomers, did not own property. While you could use SL without paying a monthly or annual subscription fee, you could not own land unless you did so. STA hoped to leverage that disadvantage by providing living space for its young visitors. But, recognizing that most SL residents were rarely at home, even when online, they devised a new type of dwelling. A set of 20 dormitory rooms would be created on one of the islands. Any registered visitor could inhabit an available room, during their stay on the island. Soon after they left it, however, the room became available to others. Registered STA Travel visitors could configure the dorm room using a number of different designs and, once configured, move the furniture around as they wished. To safeguard against lag, dorm residents would not be able to bring their own furniture or other items into their dorm rooms. On the other hand, they could save the configuration of their dorm rooms and, upon returning to the island, reconfigure their next dorm room to their original design.

EVENTS

The initial rollout of STA Travel Island was planned for April 23, 2007. Throughout the following 16 weeks the island would host regularly scheduled events. These would include Second Life scavenger hunts, global dance parties featuring music from throughout the world, and travel trivia contests. STA Travel hoped to find, among their travel partners, someone willing to sponsor or host special events. Country tourism commissions were likely participants as were publishers of travel books or specialized tour providers. The STA team had wanted to also employ speed-dating scripts developed by ESC; but these were not in the original contract and not yet in the budget. Other events were still being planned. The Australian office of STA Travel had recently expressed interest in using the island to host an in-world concert by a popular Australian band.

ESC had assigned an event coordinator for the project. Events had to be carefully orchestrated, both to ensure a reasonable audience while also worrying about lag if too many people arrived. If events were held on the boundary between the two islands, the audience could spread out across the two simulators, thus serving a bigger group. Security was also a potential problem at events, with "griefers" a potential threat to disrupt high visibility events. This was another reason for not allowing visitors to run scripts or to build things while on the island. In the last resort griefers cold be ejected and banned from the island.

THE STA TRAVEL ISLAND BLOG

Electronic Artists had been contracted to produce a Web log in the days leading up to the opening of the island. This Web site, which began publishing five weeks prior to the opening, would provide a means for people to keep up with progress on the island build, a bit about the

builders and upcoming events (see Exhibit A for typical entry). In addition to text, it contained colorful photographs taken on the island.

OPENING DAY

April 23, the official opening day of the Island, was just a few days away. A draft press release had been prepared (see Exhibit B). A decision had been made to open a few days early so that STA Travel's own staff could have an opportunity to look around. But spring was the busy season at STA Travel, and the retail operation was very busy booking real world trips. It would probably not be until sometime in May before things calmed down enough to expect much support from retail. STA Travel employees would, however, be informed about the build and, hopefully, some might come and visit during their off hours or when business was slow.

Matt Nixon was keen, in the days prior to opening the island, to begin to bring the firm's business partners to the island. He felt it could provide them with an interesting and inexpensive way to get their feet wet in SL, while also bringing value to STA Travel. Already he was wrestling with whether he should charge them for these opportunities, and at what price. But, first he had to get their interest – a task that he hoped would be easier once the island was open to the public.

Generating revenues from the island was essential if the island was to survive past August. Initially, the justification was raising brand awareness for STA. But that could only fuel the initial build, not the project's long run survival. Either additional sales would need to be traceable to the island or revenues would need to be raised through sponsorships with travel partners. Nixon hoped that some of the other STA country units would eventually commit resources to the project. In the long run, he thought the island might evolve into a site where STA agents booked real travel.

None of that, however, would be possible without traffic, and traffic would likely not be sustained without a viable virtual community on the Island. The old saw, "If you build it, they will come," kept coming to Nixon's mind. He certainly hoped so, and he also hoped some would stay AND travel.

EXHIBIT A: STA TRAVEL ISLAND BLOG: A SAMPLE ENTRY
[http://www.virtualstatravel.com]

Tue >> Apr 17, 2007
Meet the Team: Matt from STA Travel - OUR ISLAND OPENS TO THE PUBLIC: MONDAY, APRIL 23 @ 8 am SL time/11 am EST

Hi, my name is Matt from STA Travel and **my avatar is Dixie Nagy**. We are excited to welcome all virtual world travelers to STA Travel Island!

It has definitely been an amazing few months working on this project. It is fascinating to see how Second Life residents from all over the world can engage and interact with one another in a totally new way. 3-D virtual worlds I believe, give us insight into what web sites can and will increasingly look like in the future. More interactive, more engaging and definitely more social!

From STA Travel's perspective, we saw an opportunity to help college students and universities learn about this emerging technology and set about creating the "softest landing" in Second Life to date. We also wanted to make sure that **SL residents are continually surprised and entertained with a number of cool new features** such as the *dorm room concept* as well as *entertaining social events*. From our travel partners perspective, we wanted to provide them with a fun, new platform to interact with potential new residents and give them the opportunity to experience this new social platform.

I want to say a couple of big thank you's. All the crew at The Electric Sheep Company, Electric Artists, Prof. Blake Ives from the University of Houston and Hilary Mason from Johnson & Wales University have all been amazing to work with.

I hope you enjoy!

EXHIBIT B: STA TRAVEL ISLAND PRESS RELEASE

STA TRAVEL GIVES COLLEGE STUDENTS A "SECOND HOME" IN SECOND LIFE

(DALLAS – April 18, 2007) Recognizing that virtual worlds are fast becoming an important part of the college entertainment and learning experiences, STA Travel, the world's largest student and youth travel company, will open its first virtual travel center on April 23, 2007 in the online world of Second Life.

In recent months numerous universities including MIT, Harvard and the University of Houston have established vibrant virtual campuses inside Second Life. "Students don't need a travel company to move them around in Second Life, but they do need someone to provide a 'soft landing' as they enter Second Life for the first time," said Kristen Celko, STA Travel's vice president of marketing and e-commerce, North America. "Our objective is to extend our support and services beyond the first world as Second Life becomes an increasingly popular gathering place and university classroom alternative for young people."

STA Travel's location in Second Life includes:

- **Dedicated Portal and Orientation Island** which provides a "soft landing" where students can easily and quickly join Second Life and learn how to navigate the virtual world

- **Virtual Dorms** that students can customize and use for private meetings and get-togethers

- **Virtual Travel Destinations** where students can experience Mayan ruins, an Asian temple and a French café

- **STA Travel Main Office** where students can get travel and destination information

- **Live Weekly Events and Tours** produced by STA Travel as well as numerous travel partners

- **Sandbox** where students can practice building their own virtual environment

Launching today, the "STA Travel in Second Life" blog (www.virtualstatravel.com) will provide a Web companion to STA Travel's presence in Second Life. Students can experience behind-the-scenes look at the development of the STA Travel islands, locate virtual universities, and get advance notice of planned STA Travel Second Life events.

STA Travel's virtual presence in Second Life was developed by the Electric Sheep Company and ElectricArtists, Inc.

ABOUT STA TRAVEL

STA Travel is a full-service travel agency with over 70 retail locations in the United States and can be reached by calling (800) 505-1940. Students can also access the latest student airfares, packages and trips and other valuable information at www.statravel.com.The STA Travel Blue Ticket™ offers students and travelers under the age of 26 key benefits of low price, flexibility, and on-the-road service. STA Travel also has extensive resources and expertise to service group clients, with its International Programs and Group Services division. With over 400 branches in over 90 countries and serving over two and a half million students each year, STA Travel is the world expert in travel for students and young adults. STA Travel is the exclusive distributor of ISIC identification cards throughout the U.S.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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