Virtual Worlds and the Intelligence Community
Op-Ed Article by Edward M. Roche, Ph.D., J.D.

If you recently saw James Cameron's new movie AVATAR, then perhaps you are thinking of having your own personal avatar living somewhere in a virtual world. Many people are doing it, so why not you?

Let's look at the basics: A virtual world is a computer-based three-dimensional simulation intended for its users to inhabit and interact via avatars. Avatars are three-dimensional graphical representations of people, much like video game characters. They are controlled remotely by their owner. Inside a virtual world, the one's avatar expressed the participant's identity and personality.

Virtual worlds started out as a multi-party gaming platform. Individuals would be connected to each other over a network. They would be able to interact in a cybernetic reflection of the real world, complete with buildings, terraces, roadways, and other people. Today's virtual worlds have libraries, universities, research institutes, facsimiles of the finest museums, and wonderful demonstrations of complex scientific phenomena.

Perhaps like many, you are skeptical about virtual worlds, but the facts point in a different direction. Although the experience at first is strange, you probably will be surprised at how quickly your mind makes the adjustment to living in a virtual reality.

Owners tend to quickly identify with their avatar. It has been reported that most users experience a sense of tele-presence, particularly when other avatars are nearby and can be engaged in some type of social communication. This "mind meld" effect is so great that some medical researchers are finding success in pain therapy for burn patients when they are plugged in.

Current technology is not as advanced as seen in James Cameron's new movie AVATAR, but experiments are being conducted in treatment of war veterans and paraplegics who might benefit from being able to live "whole" again.

Virtual worlds are one of the most exotic and exciting technologies to come along in a long time. As measured by both the number of participants, and the scale and scope of complexity, they continue to grow rapidly. The number of participants has exceeded the population of some smaller European countries. Some argue that the virtual world platform is the richest and most complex collaborative environment ever to come into existence in cyberspace. It is the ultimate 3-D Internet social networking and social media platform.

Why are virtual worlds important? Are they merely giant online games, or something more? What, if anything, do they have to do with crime and terrorism? How do they aid the dark hand of conspiracy?

The problem is that when globalization, technology and terrorism are combined, we see the emergence of new and rather dark possibilities that must be accounted for. These "worlds" are full of pornographic sites, sex dens, recreations of slave societies, vampire societies, witchcraft, and criminal activities. Recent research has suggested a link between some activities in virtual worlds and international terrorism.

Virtual worlds, offer government and law enforcement an important source of intelligence. After all, international criminal syndicates and terrorists are using virtual worlds to coordinate their activities. But

in order to leverage this new source, it will be necessary both to understand how this new form of social media technology works, and to possess the training to exploit it.

The threat of criminal conspiracy and international terrorism is enough to pay attention. Crime scenes can be virtual as well as real. A response from the government is required. Intelligence and law enforcement must locate suitable personnel and integrate monitoring of virtual worlds into their standard surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities.

The intelligence implications of virtual world platform will be governed by their underlying technological infrastructure. Consequently, an appreciation of the relationship between technology and intelligence capabilities in this environment is based on several factors: First, what may be done by actors on all sides within these virtual world platform is enabled solely through the different applications and functions on the menu; Second, how these systems are designed and provisioned gives a clue as to how they might be compromised by either criminals or terrorists; Third, the underlying technology provides also a type of landscape through which law enforcement and intelligence communities charged with monitoring and responding to emerging threats can accomplish their work.

What is the vision for the future? Virtual worlds require 24x7 monitoring. Agents must be able to work in a variety of languages. Many of the same techniques used to infiltrate criminal groups in the real world will be used in the virtual world. It will be necessary to shield the identities of those involved. For foreign-based virtual worlds, the challenges are stiffer. Besides foreign language skills and concealed identities, the analyst must be able to communicate well enough to blend in and socially interact with those they meet. New types of dossiers and record keeping systems must be integrated with social media analysis. A new art of surveillance and cultivation of contacts must be leveraged. A watch system will be set up to trigger alarms when suspicious activity is detected.

Other countries, particularly the People's Republic of China are moving ahead. It is not too late for the United States, but the clock is ticking.

About Edward M. Roche

Edward M. Roche, Ph.D., J.D., is the Director of Scientific Intelligence for Barraclough Ltd (http://www.barracloughltd.com). With more than 30 years of corporate experience in the IT sector, he had conducted a wide range of research projects involving information technology, telecommunications, virtual worlds, national security, political economy and industrial policies for technopolae and microelectronics. He is a member of the Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA), the Association for Intelligence Officers (AFIO), FBI InfraGard and has provided expert advice to the ODNI. He received his Doctorate in Political Science at Columbia University and J.D. at Concord Law; a Masters in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C.; and studied at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

In the non-fiction VIRTUAL WORLDS REAL TERRORISM, Roche has produced a blue print detailing how virtual worlds can be mobilized as an intelligence collection channel. Based on review of scientific literature, development of case studies, as well as experimentation, VIRTUAL WORLDS REAL TERRORISM shows how criminal and terrorist organizations can use virtual worlds to conduct their activities, including operation of large fund-raising operations. Inside these complex and surprisingly large computer simulations, it is possible to create a replica of a bank to be robbed, program in the movements of security guards, and rehearse their attack. Roche covers the rise of virtual worlds in the People's Republic of China, the Middle East, and elsewhere. He sees a world in which teams of

intelligence and law enforcement professionals, including those disabled from duty, work "on the beat" 24x7 on the lookout for emerging threats.

A professor of Intelligence Technology at Henley-Putnam University, he is part of the university's diverse and experienced faculty comprised of seasoned professionals with extensive hands-on experience in military, law enforcement, counterterrorism and intelligence.

About Henley-Putnam University

Founded in August 2001, Henley-Putnam University is a leading educational institution in the field of Strategic Security. The University offers accredited online Bachelor, Master of Science Degrees in Intelligence Management, Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies, and the Management of Personal Protection, a Doctoral Degree Program in Strategic Security, and most recently added new Certificate Programs. Henley-Putnam prepares law enforcement, military, intelligence community, and private industry professionals with the network, skills, and insights to advance in their careers and protect the future. Henley-Putnam University, which is committed to building a student and alumni network that will serve its community, is an accredited member of DETC (www.detc.org) and offers 125 courses taught by hands-on faculty members from renowned organizations such as the CIA and FBI. For more information on Henley-Putnam University, call 888.852.8746 or visit http://www.Henley-Putnam.edu.