



## *Immersive Internet Storytelling Series, Issue #1*

# Role-Play Redux: “Convince The Curmudgeon”

## The ThinkBalm Innovation Community Shares Lessons Learned

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With [ThinkBalm Innovation Community](#) contributors: [Alexander Casassovici](#), [Chris Hart](#), [Christopher Bishop](#), [Donald Schwartz](#), [Jeff Lowe](#), [Leslie Ehle](#), [Marc Sirkin](#), and [Robin Gomboy](#)

*December 17, 2008*

It is an age-old question: how do a bunch of converts convince the rest of the world that *everyone* should be using this [*insert hyperbolic description of new product or tool here*] to save your [*life/ marriage/ profit margin*]? New technology evangelism focused on ROI-driven use cases is the struggle of our time — well, of the ThinkBalm Innovation Community, anyway.

- **Members of the ThinkBalm Innovation Community are early adopters.** We are a group of about 175 people who share a vision of the future of work that is deeply impacted by virtual worlds and campuses, immersive learning simulations, serious games, and 3D business applications. We have a higher-than-average tolerance for technology glitches because we can see the technology’s potential through its current limitations. (You’ll see what we mean in about 3 paragraphs.) Why do we care so much about trying new immersive technology? We have experienced firsthand the value it delivers.
- **We know the Immersive Internet is big — how do we convince others?** How can we encourage adoption of immersive technology in the workplace to occur sooner rather than later? The trouble is that Immersive Internet advocates and implementers often hit a wall when we try to share our vision with business decision makers. The Immersive Internet has roots in gaming and virtual worlds, neither of which have much caché in the business world. We need ways to more effectively communicate the value we see to the powers that be.

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- What do we do about it? For starters, we get together to practice.** On December 4, 2008 we held the ThinkBalm Innovation Community's first 3D role-playing session, "Convince the Curmudgeon." Fifteen community members gathered in an immersive environment for 90 minutes to try to convince our curmudgeonly "boss," a role played by community member [Christopher Simpson](#) of George Brown College, that our fictitious organization should be making Immersive Internet investments (see Figure 1). The group met in the community's region on [ReactionGrid](#), an OpenSim grid (a mini virtual world — essentially a neighborhood) operated by community members Kyle Gomboy and Robin Gomboy of G Squared. We met at "The Precipice," a simple meeting space ThinkBalm set up atop a cliff, designed to be conducive to risk-taking. We sat around a large board room table, with Christopher Simpson at the head of the table sitting up a little higher than the rest of us. Christopher started the conversation by stating some of his objections to enterprise use of the Immersive Internet, and then the rest of us jumped in and fired off a steady stream of arguments in favor of it.

Figure 1: Snapshot from "Convince the Curmudgeon" role-play



Source: Flickr user ReactionGrid (ThinkBalm Innovation Community member Kyle Gomboy)

Members of the ThinkBalm Innovation Community role-playing "Convince the Curmudgeon" on December 4, 2008. The oval on the right side with the "+" sign at the top is the beta version of Jeff Lowe's Attitudometer tool, which registers a group's collective reaction (positive, negative, or neutral) to what's currently going on.

## HOW MANY EXPERIMENTS CAN YOU CONDUCT AT ONCE?

A lot. Because this session was experimental in many ways, we budgeted 15 minutes at the start of the meeting to work through any technical issues people might have. The down side is we needed twice that long. During this role-playing session we:

- Used a lot of new technology.** ReactionGrid is new, having gone live only in the last couple of months. Some of us used the pre-1.0 open source Hippo OpenSim viewer, which is similar to the Second Life viewer. We used a beta version of a new 3D Attitudometer tool created by

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community member Jeff Lowe of University of Oklahoma Center for Public Management. Jeff built the tool for visually expressing meeting participants' reactions and opinions in real-time for all to see in aggregate. The catalyst for the tool was the sentiment tracking tool CNN used during the presidential debates to indicate Ohio undecided voters' reactions to what the candidates were saying during the debates.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, we used the beta version of the [EtherPad](#) real-time collaborative text editing tool via the in-world Web browser for shared note-taking and list-building.

- **Had many "firsts."** This was the community's first role-playing session. It was the first time some of us had attended a meeting in OpenSim and the first time others had used Skype voice. (ReactionGrid doesn't yet support voice over IP so we started the meeting using Skype conference calling.) We broke a record on ReactionGrid with 19 avatars logged into a region simultaneously. This was the first time Jeff Lowe's beta Attitudometer had been used in a real meeting. (For more on this tool see the related ThinkBalm article [Anonymity in the workplace: It is appropriate, sometimes.](#)) And it was the first time we tried EtherPad.
- **Pushed the limits of technology.** People's voices kept cutting out during the Skype conference call so we switched over to an old-fashioned phone dial-in number mid-stream. ReactionGrid experienced a disruption in Internet service so we were logged out of our immersive environment one after the other. We discovered bugs in the beta version of the Attitudometer and in the still-developing OpenSim. When without the visual stimulus of the 3D meeting we turned our focus to EtherPad on the Web, we discovered that no more than 8 people can modify an EtherPad simultaneously. The most stable communication tool turned out to be, not surprisingly, a tried and true century-old technology: the telephone.

## HOW DID WE GET ANYTHING DONE WITH ALL THAT CHAOS?

Despite a host of technology glitches, meeting participants stuck it out to the end. They moved uncomplainingly from one tool to the next in a dogged effort to continue communicating and learning. To the ThinkBalm analysts, this indicates an intense level of engagement. The engagement came in part from participants' passion for the topic at hand. But it was also due to the Immersive Internet. In particular:

- **Multiple channels of communication stimulated extraordinarily fast-paced conversation.** During a traditional in-person meeting or conference call, participants are expected to sit quietly and listen while one person talks at a time. Passed handwritten notes and now instant messaging back-channels (which only some participants in a meeting tend to be using) have become common workarounds. But the Immersive Internet takes us much farther than an instant messaging back-channel. It offers teams and tribes a collection of options for interacting and communicating that weren't available before. During this session, people all over the world could sit in the privacy of their own offices and simultaneously experience a traditional "aural" conversation (talking on the phone), a group text conversation (discussion typed into a chat field), multiple and myriad private one-on-one conversations via text, collaborative note-taking,

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<sup>1</sup> For an online video of a 2008 U.S. presidential debate during which a sentiment monitoring tool was used, see this link: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/15/video.transcript/>.

avatar positioning and basic gestures, and the ability to share and weigh opinions instantaneously and anonymously using the Attitudometer.

- **The 3D environment provided proxies for non-verbal communication.** When a meeting participant doesn't use their keyboard or mouse for a period of time, their avatar appears to fall asleep. Tools like the Attitudometer allow people to express sentiments, opinions, votes, etc. as a meeting is flowing, without interrupting the conversation. When a person is typing, their avatar's hands type away at an invisible keyboard (at least in OpenSim and Second Life). Avatar positioning gives cues about what a person is paying attention to. (If an avatar has its back facing us, we can assume that person isn't looking at our avatar — though camera controls can allow people to zoom and pan without appearing to do so. If an avatar walks up to a poster board or 3D object, others can assume that person's attention is on the poster board or object. If a group of avatars walks away and one gets left behind, everyone else knows that person wasn't paying attention or is having computer trouble.)

Our curmudgeon Christopher Simpson came up with a couple of good objections to Immersive Internet meetings for which we didn't have solid answers: "Enterprise immersive platforms can't scale to support very large meetings (with hundreds or thousands of simultaneous participants)," and "The initial user experience is negative because the technology is too hard to use — look how long it took us to get started today." Both are excellent points. But despite all the distractions and time wasted on technical snafus, members of the ThinkBalm Innovation Community were able to come up with a terrific list of Immersive Internet objections and supporting arguments in an hour's time (see Figure 2 through Figure 6).

**Figure 2: "It's too early to get involved with this emerging technology"**

Objection	Arguments In Favor Of The Immersive Internet
<p>The Immersive Internet is too early-stage to deliver business value. "It's coming" doesn't work in enterprise conversations. Why should I spend my money experimenting with this stuff? Let someone else spend their money on the experimentation. I'll jump in later, after the value is clearer and others have worked out the kinks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Web — even conference calls — were problematic to use in their first early days. In fact, meetings still often start late due to something going wrong with the conference call line or participants having the wrong dial-in passcode.</li> <li>• To innovate and lead, we must invest now. Competitors are doing it and we will be caught flat-footed if we don't start exploring our options now.</li> <li>• Some issues people have when using immersive technology are due to a lack of experience. This will get better over time. Of course, for mass adoption Immersive Internet interfaces must be familiar and intuitive.</li> <li>• Experience developed with a core group of advocates today will provide a jumpstart on training and best practices as the technology advances. If an organization waits to adopt this technology, the training curve may turn out to be all that much longer.</li> </ul>

Source: ThinkBalm

**Figure 3: “You’ll never be able to replace face-to-face meetings”**

Objection	Arguments In Favor Of The Immersive Internet
<p>The Immersive Internet will never be able to replace in-person meetings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Virtual meetings do not need to necessarily replace in-person meetings. Virtual meetings are just one more tool in the collaboration and communication toolbox.</li> <li>• The Immersive Internet allows people engaged in remote meetings to feel like they are really together. To experience this, look away from the screen next time you are in a meeting held in an immersive environment. Notice how different it is when you can hear the voices but not see the avatars of the others you are meeting with. Are you still able to maintain the feeling of being together in shared space with all the meeting participants?</li> <li>• When sitting in a physical meeting it's impossible to talk to the person sitting next to you without being rude. You can instant message with people in the room if you have IM technology but even that can come across as rude. With the Immersive Internet, local text chat during an in-person meeting is par for the course and you can have private IM conversations without anyone being the wiser. In fact, it's a commonly accepted practice.</li> </ul>

Source: ThinkBalm

**Figure 4: “There is no such thing as true human multitasking.”**

Objection	Arguments In Favor Of The Immersive Internet
<p>Multiple channels of communication are a weakness, not a strength.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple channels of simultaneous communication speed up the pace of idea sharing and increase participant engagement.</li> <li>• Multichannel is the way Millennials interact with each other and they will expect to be able to do so in the workplace.</li> <li>• Maybe you lose some communication when it's so fast-paced and multichannel, unless you log it somehow. But you also lose people to daydreaming, mind-wandering, and multitasking with boring conference calls and in-person meetings. Might as well keep the multitasking on-topic!</li> <li>• High-density, multi-channel communication can be recorded and viewed or listened to after the fact. This is a powerful addition to a meeting’s work product.</li> </ul>

Source: ThinkBalm

Figure 5: “We don’t need yet another communication and collaboration tool.”

Objection	Arguments In Favor Of The Immersive Internet
<p>What's so great about the Immersive Internet? I'll just use the phone, Web conferencing, and video conferencing, or wait for telepresence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phone calls and Web conferences are not particularly engaging. The combination of visual interest, the ability of all participants to take action on their avatars or surroundings, and multichannel communication make meetings in immersive environments highly engaging.</li> <li>• The Immersive Internet is not a replacement for Web conferencing or phone calls. It's something new altogether. It allows you to do things that can't be done any other way, like fly through 3D business process models or view huge chemical models or go inside a model of the human head prior to performing a surgical procedure. It allows participants to collaboratively create 3D displays/models on the fly on the conference table to illustrate points.</li> <li>• On conference calls you can't tell who is talking. In immersive environments you can, if voice over IP is integrated. You see an indicator over the speaker's head.</li> <li>• For telepresence sessions, participants usually have to go to a special telepresence room. Also, telepresence is expensive to set up and maintain. In contrast, a person can participate in a meeting in an immersive environment with only a powerful-enough computer, headset, and high-speed Internet connection.</li> <li>• People can react and interact while others are speaking. Avatars can raise their hands to get the attention of a speaker or moderator. They can clap or wave or jump or even do a little dance if that is an appropriate reaction. None of this is possible, really, via either conference call or telepresence session.</li> <li>• You can easily go from virtual place to virtual place to increase the feeling of group participation and facilitate experiential memory. If a demo or piece of media or resource is located in a part of the immersive environment that would be a better forum for sharing a concept or an idea, a participant can take the entire team there. People can show each other what they and others are working on.</li> <li>• The Immersive Internet presents many options for using media. People can stream live or recorded video and audio, use PowerPoint slides, create avatar animations, create digital artifacts to be shared or given away (even as rewards for innovative thinking or exemplary participation) or simply as mementoes or souvenirs — again, to reinforce the sense of involvement. Try doing that on a conference call!</li> </ul>

Source: ThinkBalm

Figure 6: “The Immersive Internet is too expensive”

Objection	Arguments In Favor Of The Immersive Internet
We can't spend money on stuff like that right now.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider investment from a cost avoidance perspective. If you can get a comparable amount of work done in an immersive environment to what you can get done in a physical meeting that requires travel, then why spend the extra money on airfare, hotel, food, carbon footprint, and lost productivity of employees winging around the globe?</li><li>• Before you ask, "What will it cost?" let's talk about what to use it <i>for</i>. You may find that the cost of an Immersive Internet solution can save big money compared to the way work is getting done today. Look in areas like learning and training, meetings and conferences, business activity simulation, collaborative design and prototyping, collaborative 3D data visualization, human resources management, and remote system and facility management</li><li>• It doesn't have to be ridiculously expensive. A team can experiment with virtual meetings in Second Life or OpenSim pretty much for free. A team can use Qwaq Forums for \$65 USD per month per registered user. An enterprise can erect a high-quality private region in an immersive environment, where roughly 30-50 people can meet simultaneously, for in the ballpark of \$50,000 to \$100,000 USD.</li></ul>

Source: ThinkBalm

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By any measure, our first role-playing session was a technical debacle. It was also a tremendous success. The comedy of errors associated with the new venue, tools, communication mechanisms and meeting agenda was simply fodder for the discussion about how to better present the case for the Immersive Internet. We didn't lose any of our participants during the 90-minute meeting, even when we transitioned from Skype to phone and from in-world to Web-based EtherPad. That is impressive in itself. All in all, what did we learn from this event?

*Keep it simple and keep it about the business – always about the business.*

- **Marketing the Immersive Internet to business decision makers is the great hurdle.** Most Immersive Internet advocates are struggling with how to convince decision makers of the power of immersive technology. Everyone at this meeting had a story about the resistance they faced, and many had a scattered approach to promoting their ideas. Many of us are still using the wrong language, the wrong metaphors and the wrong comparisons to explain immersive technology. Our takeaway: Show the business value of this new tool. Don't just talk about it. *Show it.* Avoid technical discussions. Don't get hung up on theory.

- **Pick one business problem and focus on a solution before making the pitch.** Immersive technology can be applied in many ways, but don't overwhelm your audience. Keep it simple and keep it about the business — always about the business. Pick a single problem for which immersive environments are a good solution, and work with that. Focus like a laser on this solution before making your pitch.
- **Role-playing is an engaging and productive use of the Immersive Internet.** We learned first-hand that role-playing in an immersive environment can be a powerful learning experience. Role-playing is a form of business activity rehearsal, along with running “what-if” scenarios and safely conducting business activity rehearsals that would be dangerous, expensive, or impossible in physical world. Immersive business activity rehearsals have the potential to result in more effective work and teamwork practices, easier best-practice sharing, more highly skilled workers, and fewer failures during events due to strengthened “muscle memory.”<sup>2</sup>
- **Designate roles — especially moderator, tech, and scribe.** You'll definitely need a moderator and a scribe and if you are using new tools you'll need a tech. The role of the tech is to help participants troubleshoot issues they encounter with the technology. The moderator's job is to keep the conversation flowing and synthesize multiple channels of communication. The scribe takes notes. Save a copy of the text chat to use when writing up the meeting. Take snapshots during your event because a picture is worth a thousand words.
- **Have a backup communication plan in place.** Have a telephone dial-in number at hand in case the voice over IP fails. If participants have access to instant messaging (e.g., IBM Lotus Sametime, Microsoft Office Communicator, Skype) make sure everyone is logged into their IM client. Instant messaging coordination can be hard across corporate boundaries so email can be a last resort if you need to quickly send out a dial-in number or point participants to a Web page. Make sure all meeting participants have their email client running.
- **A tool like the Attitudometer has enormous potential.** At the start of the session we instructed people to use the tool to communicate their reaction to arguments being made. But we needed to do much more preparation to flesh out the tool's purpose and proper procedures for using it. We the moderators needed to do more to make the Attitudometer an active participant in the meeting — to use its indicators to help guide the conversation and uncover new directions for exploration. And we needed to do a better job of instructing participants how to launch and use the tool's heads-up display (HUD).

## The Waning Of The Curmudgeon Era: A Prediction

Was our role-playing session perfect? No. Did we learn a tremendous amount? Yes. Will we do it again? Without a doubt. As enterprise adoption of the Immersive Internet continues to increase — in support of training and education, collaboration, onboarding of new employees and many other applications as yet to be discovered — we predict that even the most curmudgeonly decision makers will slowly come around. As the business value and global socio-cultural impact of immersive environments becomes more and more apparent, stakeholders who are balking in late 2008 will comprehend the intrinsic value of these tools and use them to drive innovative business models and create and support a new global community in 2009 and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about seven enterprise use cases for the Immersive Internet see the November 17, 2008 ThinkBalm report, “[The Immersive Internet: Make Tactical Moves Today For Strategic Advantage Tomorrow.](#)”

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### Erica Driver



Erica Driver is a co-founder and principal at ThinkBalm. She is a leading industry analyst with more than 14 years of experience in IT. She is quoted in mainstream and industry trade press, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, *CIO*, and *Computerworld*. Prior to co-founding ThinkBalm, Erica was a Principal Analyst at Forrester Research, where she launched the company's Web3D coverage as part of her enterprise collaboration research. She was also the co-conspirator behind Forrester's Information Workplace concepts and research.

While at Forrester, Erica served as a strategic advisor to a wide range of clients, including Alcoa, Bell Canada, Dominion Resources, GlaxoSmithKline, IBM, Marriott, Microsoft, Raytheon, Roche, the United Nations, and the U.S. General Services Administration. Prior to her tenure at Forrester, she was a Director at Giga Information Group (now part of Forrester) and an analyst at Hurwitz Group (now Hurwitz & Associates). She began her career in IT as a system administrator and Lotus Notes developer. Erica is a graduate of Harvard University and is a member of The eLearning Guild and the Association of Virtual Worlds.

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Sam Driver is a co-founder and principal at ThinkBalm. He is an inventor and entrepreneur whose take on the Immersive Internet is heavily influenced by science, game theory, and science fiction. At the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Sam was part of a team that discovered RNA interference (RNAi), which was awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. He founded QIK Technology to develop intellectual property (IP) holdings in functional genomics and co-founded a small Rhode Island-based residential real estate investment partnership. He also founded and operates Evil Minions Games, an IP and product development company, and established and runs a regional gaming organization. He's also an instrument-rated private pilot. Sam

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## ThinkBalm Innovation Community Contributors

A very special thanks to the following ThinkBalm Innovation Community members who participated in the December 4, 2008 role-playing session and reviewed and contributed to this article prior to its publication: [Alexander Casassovici](#), [Chris Hart](#), [Christopher Bishop](#), [Donald Schwartz](#), [Jeff Lowe](#), [Leslie Ehle](#), [Marc Sirkin](#), and [Robin Gomboy](#).

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## About ThinkBalm

ThinkBalm offers independent IT industry analysis and strategic advisory services to technology marketers and Immersive Internet advocates, implementers, and explorers. We focus on enterprise use of the Immersive Internet, which includes:

- Virtual worlds and campuses
- Immersive learning simulations
- Serious games
- 3D business applications

ThinkBalm also operates and nurtures the ThinkBalm Innovation Community, a collaborative community with the mission of on propelling enterprise use of the Immersive Internet forward. The ThinkBalm Innovation Community has the Spigit™ serious game engine at its core.

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