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Newsmaker: Reuters' 'Second Life' reporter talks shop

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newsmakers On Oct. 16, Reuters opened its first all-digital bureau, a building in the virtual world "Second Life" modeled on its New York and London offices.

Almost immediately, news agencies around the world picked up on the story, intrigued by the fact that one of the oldest existing news outlets would choose to station Adam Pasick, a full-time reporter, in an entirely virtual environment.

For its part, Reuters is using the bureau to disseminate its real-world news feeds to "Second Life" residents, hoping in the process to find a new audience.

Reuters is not the only news outlet to hang a shingle in "Second Life." In fact, [CNET had previously opened a "Second Life" bureau](#) and has been using the virtual space as a venue for interviewing luminaries from the technology community.

Still, the fact that Reuters--which is better known for financial and business reporting than for culture coverage--decided to set up shop in "Second Life" is noteworthy.

Known in-world as Adam Reuters, Pasick is new to covering virtual worlds. ("[Second Life](#)" enables corporate clients to purchase their company's name as a last name for employees' avatars.) But as a seasoned Internet reporter, he is approaching the assignment as he would any new gig.

On Monday, Pasick visited CNET's "Second Life" bureau and sat down for an interview in front of an audience of about 40, during which he talked about many of the issues facing a reporter in such a different kind of environment.

Q: This has been a pretty exciting week or so for you, I'm guessing. What has it been like?

Pasick: You could say that the reaction to our launch went way beyond anything we had expected. Now that the attention from the mainstream press is dying down a little, I'm looking forward to getting into the reporting. We thought we might make a little splash. Instead, I've been getting interview requests from Poland, Colombia, Brazil, New Zealand.

How did the Reuters bureau come about?

Pasick: The idea originally came from a conversation between our CEO, [Tom Glocer](#), and Linden Lab CEO [Philip Rosedale](#) at the [Sun Valley Conference](#) earlier this year. They came to me (recently) and asked if I wanted to run the bureau.

Why you?

Pasick: I've been writing about technology and media for a while, and somehow, I've gotten the reputation within Reuters of being a bit of a geek.

What was your initial reaction to being asked if you wanted to do this? Did you know much about "Second Life" at that point?

Pasick: I had heard of "Second Life" but never had been in-world. To be completely honest, when I first heard the idea, I was a bit dubious. But even as I talked it over that first time, I saw that it could be a great idea if done well. I think that's typical of "Second Life": The more time you spend, the more it makes sense.

From that perspective, what did you think "done well" would mean?

Pasick: Offering something useful to the community and being a learning experience for Reuters. If it was just a quick PR hit, I wouldn't have been interested. This is my full-time job. I badly want it to succeed.

So what do you see as the "mission" of Reuters in "Second Life"?

Pasick: If we can provide good financial news and data to the "Second Life" business community, and find a new audience for Reuters among "Second Life" residents, I'll be happy.

So it's as much about bringing Reuters news into "Second Life" as about sending "Second Life" news out?

Pasick: It's twofold. We bring in real-life Reuters news for those who want it, and I write stories specifically for "Second Life" residents.

How do you plan to differentiate your "Second Life" coverage from that of the many "Second Life" bloggers?

Pasick: Well, there will be a certain amount of competition. That's inevitable. But there are so many good stories, especially in the economy and business sectors that I'm focusing on. We're just getting started. We're hoping to do a lot of quantitative stories about the economy, for example. That's one area where Reuters has a lot of expertise.

What was your budget for the bureau?

Pasick: I don't know the exact figure. Luckily, I didn't have to sit through those meetings. But it was a relative drop in the bucket for a company our size.

How does Reuters plan to make this effort cost-effective?

Pasick: Right now, there is no direct return-on-investment calculation. We're not selling subscriptions or advertising, for example. But this has the potential to be a very valuable source of experience and exposure to a new tech-savvy community. And it's a tiny project for Reuters. I think my bosses are happy to see where it leads without having a direct source of revenue for now.

How will you and your bosses measure success in this endeavor?

Pasick: I can't give away our internal metrics for success. But broadly speaking, we're measuring visitors to Secondlife.reuters.com and use of (an in-world device that delivers Reuters news to residents). Traffic is the easiest to measure, but it's not the only yardstick we're watching. The caliber of my stories is another. So the pressure's on.

Are you expected to produce scoop after scoop?

Pasick: I'm sure they'd be ecstatic if I did. But no, I think they'll give me some time to learn the ropes.

What are some similarities you've seen between covering this stuff and a "normal" beat?

Pasick: The more time I spend in "Second Life," the more it feels like any other beat. Once you get over--or maybe embrace--the weirdness, it's much the same job: You find interesting people, read as much as you can and chase up the interesting story ideas you find.

What about some of the differences?

Pasick: We've had to do a bit of work adapting the Reuters editorial guidelines to deal with the fact that avatars are anonymous vis-a-vis their real-life identities. I know it breaks the metaphor a bit, but I ask people to provide their real-life identities. Not everyone wants to, and that's their right. I also take into account the reputation that is built up over time in "Second Life." I'm much more likely to trust a quote from someone who's been there awhile.

"Second Life" has gotten a lot of positive press. But there are also many issues that call for critical coverage. [It is a business](#) with all kinds of problems. What do you see as some of those?

Pasick: I think I'll gracefully pass on that one. If I have a story, you'll have to wait until I publish.

Well, how about broad topics?

Pasick: OK. Property rights. Contract law. And [scalability issues](#).

How do you explain your new beat to friends, family and colleagues who don't understand what "Second Life" or virtual worlds are?

Pasick: I've had a lot of practice. But I've found the best way is to get them in front of a computer and show them. My parents love it now. They have avatars and hang out in the Reuters building.

Gabriel Riiser (from the audience) asks: There was a Slashdot article recently about several builders of virtual worlds, like Matt Mihaly (CEO of [Achaea](#), published by Iron Realms Entertainment), who are criticizing "Second Life" and Linden Lab for being too much about PR and not enough about the quality of the world itself. What's your take, Adam?

Pasick: I think I'm going to use that old reporter's dodge--which happens to be true--and say that I think I'll report the facts and leave the opinions to smarter people.

But surely, you must have noticed that Linden Lab is rather adept at PR?

Pasick: Well, you don't get to a million registered avatar names by being dumb.

Liv Kamloops (from the audience) asks: Do you see "Second Life" becoming an interactive version of the Internet?

Pasick: This question probably has the potential to make me sound like an idiot. However, I think it makes a lot of sense for there to be a 3D successor to the Internet, and "Second Life" looks like the best candidate at the moment.

Why do you think it's the best candidate?

Pasick: It's a relatively open platform, with content created by users and which is non-game-based. It makes sense that some virtual 3D world or worlds is going to be what's next. Maybe it's "Second Life." Who knows? We wouldn't be here if we didn't think it was a possibility. ■