

Dispatch from the Digital Frontier: Virtual World changes; 2010 Consumer Electronics Show; 3-D e-Learning?

By [Anne Derryberry](#)

January 21, 2010

Happy New Year! I hope the new decade (*n.b.*, it's a new decade, no matter what year launches it) is treating you well. Already, our industry is seeing both excitement and disappointment. Could it be that the (translated) French maxim is right? "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Brave new world(s)

After 2009 saw 3dSolve acquired by Lockheed Martin, a shake-up at Second Life-producer Linden Labs, and Virtual Heroes acquired by Applied Research Associates, the virtual world market experienced further contraction at the end of December. Now, Forterra Systems (www.forterrainc.com) has laid off most of its core engineering staff, its VP of marketing, and others, leaving some 20 employees to fulfill its contracts and meet its obligations. Chris Badger, former marketing VP, expects Forterra to be acquired by a defense industry systems integrator.

Robert Gerhorsam, Forterra's president, recently wrote on ThinkBalm (<http://bit.ly/74JAUE>) that he still sees growth and opportunity for virtual world technology in the Enterprise and Government sectors.

Certainly, the interest of the defense industry seems evident. I would argue that health care and medicine offer better market opportunity in the near term than does the world of business. Most providers of enterprise-oriented virtual world (VW) "solutions" continue to emphasize online meetings *cum* group productivity as its disruptive advantage. Online meeting solutions providers (e.g., GoToMeeting, WebEx) credibly dispute these assertions.

The jury is out on VW technology for the enterprise. Why? No provider has yet articulated and demonstrated a compelling, unique, cost effective, repeatable use for its technology in a business setting. Let's stay tuned...

What can you learn from Detroit?

The 2010 Consumer Electronics Show was filled with excitement and possibility, as vendors large and small debuted new products and technology. Ford Motors put up one of the most popular exhibits, where they debuted their new cabin technology interface.

MyFord Touch is a complete redesign of the display of digital information to cabin occupants, and will be available in Ford cars later this year. Drivers will monitor engine and trip data via two dashboard displays which they customize and control through buttons on the steering wheel.

All cars will come with an enhanced navigation system (maps provided by MapQuest); an additional screen is optional. These touch screens will also be the cars' entertainment gateway, allowing surfing of every Bluetooth-enabled device within the cabin. Further, Ford is establishing partnerships with content providers to enhance the travel experience of drivers and passengers alike.

Every automaker, of course, offers some kind of digital info/entertainment hub option, but consumers find just about every system wanting in some way. Ford has taken these complaints to heart, and has spent considerable resources and brainpower to re-think the "cabin experience." MyFord Touch is the result.

But why is this relevant for e-Learning professionals? Ford user interface designers wrestled with questions of menu structure, optimal positioning of data displays, screen customization, input methods, data visualization... Sound familiar? A test drive might be in order.

Is there another dimension in our future?

A few months ago, my cable company ran ads for free 3-D glasses for the new 3-D movies they were showing: Coraline, a Jonas Brothers concert, and some slasher/vampire flick. I didn't give a hoot about the shows, but the 3-D part was too cool to pass up. I got the glasses – each show had its own pair of the same cheesy cardboard-frame plastic-film lenses that were used when I was a kid. It's a good thing the shows weren't any good, since the glasses still make me queasy.

3-D has grown up a lot, though, as James Cameron's "Avatar" has demonstrated. Of course, it took \$500 million to create Pandora – and much better glasses to experience it. Still, a new bar has been set for developers of fantasy entertainment.

And for sports... ESPN has just announced ESPN 3D, which will launch June 11 with the first 2010 FIFA World Cup match (no mention of glasses in the announcement).

A number of TV manufacturers (e.g., Samsung, Sony) have announced 3-D TV (yes, plus glasses) releases for 2010. So far, sneak peak reviews are not impressive. But, there is no question that the 3-D trend is gaining momentum.

Imagine for a moment what this can mean to learning. Learners could gain a much better understanding of the physical relationships between objects. By marrying 3-D images and GPS, the learners' experiences can be modified according to their physical location and position vis-à-vis the images they view. Introduce 3-D imaging to a Wii environment, and learners can receive visual, audio, AND haptic feedback to their actions and/or decisions.

No news on smell-o-vision yet. But it's only January.

