I can’t say it was a religious experience, but Jesus was next to me. And he was dancing. On my other side, a dolphin floated a few feet above the ground on a surfboard. I think his date was the cute brunette who pirouetted non-stop, or maybe it was the pig that waddled around him in small circles. I can’t be sure because I was really there for the music — Lambchop, a Nashville band playing live in Austin to this crowd of music lovers from around the world, and throughout the animal kingdom apparently.

As music lovers may know, Lambchop is very real, but Jesus and the rest of us weren’t, at least that night. We were avatars drawn to the music or the inter-species socializing or the hope of seeing Michael Nesmith of Monkees’ fame, the wizard behind the curtain of this virtual world concert called VideoRanch 3D. Every month or so Nesmith tapes a live band before a green screen and inserts it into VideoRanch. As a music nut, I love the opportunity to see bands with a colorful crowd. And as a developer, I’m thrilled to see the line between virtual and real worlds continue to blur.

While I make videogames for a living, I don’t spend a lot of time in virtual worlds. My purview is handheld games — smartphones, DSs, mobile stuff like that. I’m often asked to help un-game-like organizations — workforce development non-profits, public radio stations, car dealerships (!) — bring games into their organizations. While they talk about game elements, such as avatars, rewards systems, and user-generated content, a game isn’t really what they want. They want community. They want social stickiness. They want a digital forum that compels folks, regardless of geography, to convene and invest in a group, an idea, a movement.

That’s what Nesmith is after with VideoRanch. Same for the petroleum engineering class I visited in which students were encouraged to make mistakes — big mistakes — on virtual oil wells where explosions and spills are corrected with a keystroke. And same for the simulator I tried that trains budding diplomats how to navigate the complex social norms of Afghanistan. They all are fostering community by creating safe worlds where we as users can create, communicate, and make a few mistakes.

I don’t know if virtual worlds are encroaching on the real world, games are seeping into work, or everything we touch is becoming social and interconnected, and I don’t think it really matters. What matters is we’re inventing new ways to come together to share, create, and debate. It’s thrilling. It’s terrifying. And it continues to touch us in new ways.

Rodney Gibbs
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