

A facebook for avatars

IMVU: Instant Messaging with a 3D Viewer



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by BalancingAct Balbozar

You may recall the banner ads—the IMVU logo with its cute blue font and pictures of cute avatars.

IMVU (www.imvu.com) is a 3D avatar-based instant messaging system with extensive user-created content, Facebook-style avatar home pages, and a cute and sexy anime style. It is still in the public beta phase and pushes roughly one software update to users each week.

IMVU lets users express themselves by creating and customizing a 3D avatar with a wide variety of clothes, accessories, pets, and scenes. The service has been releasing beta versions for several years, and it is generating a rapidly growing revenue stream through the exchange of virtual currency in the form of credits.

So why would a Second Lifer such as myself spend time and money on IMVU? There are a number of compelling features to consider:

- Free 3D avatar-based chat, with significantly fewer distractions and less variability than a typical Second Life session
- A free home page for your avatar that you can customize extensively in the style of MySpace or FaceBook, with space for personal interests and avatar friends
- A comments area where visiting avatars can make multimedia posts, blog, and post pictures, videos, and tunes
- A consistent and easy-to-use search-for-users feature based on gender, age, range, location, interests, and other attributes
- One-stop shopping for all your avatar and home page needs from a catalog featuring a diverse collection of virtual products from hundreds of developers, all of whom are IMVU users
- A cute and sexy anime—or manga-style avatar that does not require special avatar design skills to customize—and no Second Life “bad hair days”

- Download your avatar’s clothes, rooms, vehicles, and other items without loss of inventory
- Develop content after an \$8.00 USD one-time charge to “buy your avatar name” and agree to terms
- Spice up your chat experience with a one-time \$20.00 charge for an “Access Pass.”

Getting Started with IMVU

After you register and install the software, you can learn how to use the IMVU windows, work with your inventory, find buddies, and customize your home page.

During the registration process for your free account, you provide your avatar’s name, gender, your date of birth, location (down to the state level), the kind of relationship in which you find yourself, your sexual orientation, and what you are looking for on IMVU (chatting, dating, relationships, friendship, or other).

With your free account, you get the following goodies:

- A custom avatar
- A basic set of clothes for your avatar
 - four accessories
 - four bottoms
 - four pairs of shoes
 - four tops
 - three hairstyles
- Two modifiable rooms—your Loft apartment and a “Bionic White Room” for no-background snapshots of your avatar
- Five unmodifiable (“locked”) rooms/scenes
- Nine pieces of furniture that are already set up in your Loft apartment
- ModIcons, 3D animated “smileys” for use during chat

In addition to your initial inventory of stuff, you get a Facebook-style home page for your avatar and several hundred promotional (“promo”) credits with which to purchase “products” for



your inventory and home page. After I learned the basics, I used my promo credits to buy my avatar a preferred hairdo and eyeglasses.

Your avatar’s name is prefixed by Guest_ unless you pay for your name (more about this later).

You’ll notice a lot of style similarities between IMVU and There.com (reviewed in the November 2007 issue of *The Seventh Sun*)—it’s no coincidence. IMVU is the latest project of noted computer game designer Will Harvey, who also designed There.com.

Using the IMVU Messenger Window

The IMVU Messenger window shows your buddy list and inventory.



The IMVU Messenger window

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Using the Messenger window, you'll first want to go through the one-minute tutorial (Help > Tutorial). You learn the basics of controlling your avatar and interacting with others and also how to take a decent snapshot of your avatar. Here's what you do during the tutorial:







Tutorial Step 1:

Click the 3D My room button. This displays a default room for your avatar. You may notice your computer's CPU utilization briefly jumps to nearly 100%.



An avatar in the IMVU default room

Your avatar is rendered in the middle of the default room.

-  The hammer-shaped button in the lower left allows you to move your furniture around.
-  The bird-shaped button to the right switches the camera view position and orientation between semi-bird's eye view and default view.
-  The red x button minimizes the five buttons to the right of it.
-  The My stuff button brings window focus back to the Messenger window and brings the Inventory tab forward.
-  The Shop catalog button opens a new window or tab of your web browser and takes you to the top-level IMVU catalog web page.
-  The Take snapshot button superimposes a camera field of view in either portrait or landscape mode.

Use the mouse and left mouse button to zoom the camera. The camera will always stay pointed at the base of your avatar's head. Use the right mouse button or the arrow keys to translate the camera's direction away from the default aim point.

Tutorial Step 2:

Compose a picture and wait for your constantly-moving avatar to assume the pose you want, take a portrait picture, check it, and click Upload as avatar.

You're done with the one-minute tutorial! It's that easy. Now both your home page and "Your Avatar wants to Chat" splash window feature the picture you just uploaded. And you've now left behind the herd of users who register for IMVU accounts but never use them.

When you get a chance, you'll want to visit the account set-up page on the IMVU website and change your tagline to something more interesting than the default "Hi!" Having a well-done avatar image and nice tagline tells other users that you are no longer a newbie.

Getting Information about Other Avatars

Left-click on any avatar in a room to open that avatar's menu. The menu shows the avatar's name and gives you the choice of opening your web browser with their home page, changing expressions, moves, modicons, or moods. Clicking other people's avatars gives you the choice of winking at, hugging, kissing, punching them, and other actions.



Left-click an avatar to view his/her menu

Finding Buddies and Meeting New People

Since your buddy list is initially empty, you'll probably want to find someone with whom to chat. There are a number of ways to accomplish this: Random Match-ups ("Chat Now!"), People Search, Groups, Invite Your Friends, Forums, Chatmatch, and Public Rooms.

Random Match-Up ("Chat Now!")

Click the "Chat now!" button on the lower left of the Messenger window. This starts your avatar in your default room.

You see a long list of users that are online now in "available" status. When you are in "available" status, your avatar record appears in this lengthy list of available chatters.



Users in "available" status

I have seen over 60,000 users online at any given time, although many can be Away From Keyboard (AFK). Being in "available" status is kind of like placing yourself on "The Circuit" from the movie Logan's Run: you never know who is going to invite you to chat or when or into what kind of room your avatar will be teleported. Using the IMVU account setup web page, you can opt-out of this feature.

I do not recommend randomly looking for users via the Feeling lucky button, unless you want to waste a lot of time.

People Search

This is a search engine for finding users on the IMVU website. You can search for users using a number of search attributes, including whether they are developers. I highly recommend People Search.

If you see an avatar listed in the search results with whom you'd like to chat, click the Add Buddy link next to his/her name if the avatar is not online, otherwise click the Chat now in 3D link. Adding a buddy creates a row in the Buddies list in the Messenger window. Whenever a buddy is online, you can invite him/her to chat.

After issuing over sixty buddy requests, inviting them to chat, and chatting with some of them, I made a small set of buddies with whom chatting is a real pleasure.

Groups

A group is a collection of users who share a common interest. Interests are assigned into one of fifteen predefined categories, for example: anime, computers, or science. Each group has a list of members and a discussion board on the IMVU website. Some groups require



Chatting with a cute avatar in my default room

IMVU

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“VIP” status, which costs \$4.99 USD for the first month and \$9.99 USD per month afterward. VIP members receive an allowance of 5000 credits/month as well as a number of other benefits (see www.imvu.com/catalog/newsletter/vip_landing.php).

Invite Your Friends

This is the now-common practice of importing your list of e-mail contacts so that IMVU can compare the list you import



Example chat request splash page

with e-mail addresses of current IMVU users. Use this feature via the IMVU website. I have not tried this feature.

Forums

Forums are discussion boards on the IMVU website that are open to all users and do not require group affiliation.

Chatmatch

Chatmatch is the same as People Search except that it displays only users who are currently online.

Public Rooms

Public rooms are accessible either using the IMVU website or a 3D room window. “Joining” a public room teleports your avatar into the room. Public rooms can be really slow, but you can see and meet a lot of avatars quickly.

Inviting or Being Invited to Chat

Once you find a buddy or prospective buddy, you can invite him/her to chat. When you invite someone to chat with you, his/her computer silently opens a splash page indicating that you want to chat. The splash window shows the picture of the avatar, avatar name, gender, and age.

Your buddy or prospective buddy clicks Accept to chat or Decline (with an optional message to you) if busy. If your invitation is accepted, your buddy’s avatar rezzes into your avatar’s current room, with your avatar already standing there waiting.

Your invitation times out after about thirty seconds. If your buddy or prospective buddy declines without giving a reason, he/she is in “buddies only” mode (accepting invitations from buddies only) or “do not disturb” mode.

Depending upon the condition, you’ll see one of the following messages in a dialog box:

- Invitation to chat with avatar None timed out
- None declined your invitation to chat. Reason: no reason given.
- None declined your invitation to chat. Reason: Sorry, I’m in Buddy Only mode.
- None declined your invitation to chat. Reason: Sorry, I’m in Do Not Disturb mode.
- None declined your invitation to chat. Reason: (user defined)

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Once you and your buddy are in the same room, you can start chatting. If you're lucky, maybe a really cute avatar will accept your invitation to chat in your default room.

Chat bubbles are used by default. These do not quite work as well as they work in There.com—the camera elevation is much less constrained in IMVU. The bubbles chase your avatar around the room if you change location.

You can configure your 3D windows to have a text chat transcript appear as well using Messenger window > Settings > Text Chat. This is essential for chatting in rooms with many avatars.

Moving your avatar around in rooms or scenes takes some real getting used to. You don't actually move, you teleport from the pose point on which your avatar is attached to the closest appropriate pose point under your mouse pointer. If close enough, the pose point under your mouse pointer will change from a yellow dot to a chair icon to indicate you will definitely teleport to it. Since these pose points have no perspective and appear equally well through many walls, it's very easy to accidentally teleport your avatar clear across a room or through walls to another room. Each pose point can feature an animation for any avatar that rests on it, for example: dance moves.

Creating Virtual Products as an IMVU Developer

After mastering the basics, I decided to become a product developer to create inventory and web page items, and to offer them for sale in the IMVU catalog. To do this you have to "purchase your avatar's name" for a one-time \$8.00 USD fee which removes the Guest_ prefix. You also must agree to the developer terms. I purchased the "Fun Pack" for \$14.95 USD, which included my avatar's name and 10,000 credits. There are ten credits per \$0.01 USD.

If you decide to try IMVU, visit the home page of the avatar named KittenKat for some really useful tutorials on how to get started developing products.

If you are hoping to just develop content for yourself for free, you can forget it. With a few exceptions, the only way for you to get new content into your inventory or onto your home page is to purchase it through the IMVU catalog, even if you are the developer. (IMVU is a business, after all.) You pay IMVU a small submission fee whenever you submit a product to the catalog, even if you expect that only you will use it.

Purchasing the "Access Pass" (AP) and verifying that you are at least 18 years of age will definitely spice up your IMVU experience. Every product in IMVU has a rating of "general audience" or "Access Pass only." Getting AP allows AP-rated products to be rezzed in your rooms or appear in your web browser when you visit an avatar's home page, Groups, or Public Room.

The AP requires a one-time \$20.00 USD fee. You are required to purchase it via credit card (rather than PayPal) so that IMVU, Inc. can verify the age of the credit card holder. If you hope to prevent IMVU, Inc. from knowing your real identity, don't purchase the AP.

Your home page features a "wish list" so that visitors know what you would like to receive as gifts. Gifts can be a product, avatar name, or even AP status. If you really enjoyed your last chat with a buddy, consider posting a message on their home page that expresses your feelings and leave a gift from his/her wish list. The price of the gift is deducted from your credit balance.

And here's another tip: be on the lookout for time-sensitive special offers on name, access pass, VIP status, credits, and other items. These are prominently advertised on the IMVU website.

A Great Way to Meet People

So, once again, why would a Second Lifer such as myself spend time and money on IMVU?

IMVU adds a personal face to social networking—in the form of cute anime- or manga-style avatars with 3D rooms and inventory—that is lacking in 2D web sites like MySpace and Facebook. It also does not have the bandwidth requirements or learning curve of Second Life, so I meet people in IMVU that I might not otherwise encounter in Second Life.

IMVU is by no means perfect, but I am definitely hooked—primarily because of the great chat buddies I've made. ☼

Website Traffic Report

Announcing the winners of the Traffic Competition



www.TheSeventhSun.com

Congratulations to San Diego, California, the grand prize winner of The 2007 Seventh Sun Traffic Competition! In second place is New York, followed by London.

In a dramatic final hour show down, Santee, California, was disqualified from second place for being a spider. Another decision that affected the results was to adjust the rankings of Portland to compensate for SurfDaddy's visits to the website. These decisions put both cities out of the running and moved New York and London into the winner's circle.

If you live in a city that participated in the competition, please stop by our website to pick up your certificate. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all participants, because everyone's a winner! ☼

Final Results

First place:	San Diego, California USA	.08731%
Second place:	New York, New York USA	.02661%
Third place:	London, England	.02490%



The Seventh Sun is now read in over 1526 cities worldwide.