"It's geared for people who want to spend time wanting to interact with other people beyond their family," she said. "They are the same sort of people who go and hang out in the afternoon in various places or get together after work."

On the Internet, Ms. Dyson noted, the social interaction in chat rooms often disintegrates into "trivial, useless, sex-oriented" babble. And game-based virtual worlds are usually filled with people who want to play games or talk about them.

A virtual destination like There, she said, is more akin to going to a cooking class or an art museum to meet people. "It's for people who want to be doing something while they meet people," she said. What is striking about There is the lengths to which it goes to mimic the mundane detail of everyday life. Members can guide their avatars by basically using the directional keys on a standard computer keyboard not only to meet friends and make new ones but also to explore There's worlds. That can mean anything from spending a day in a spa, where avatars can receive makeovers and haircuts, to surfing in a virtual ocean or joining in a spontaneous game of paintball.

At There.com, users can enter a virtual world as avatars, meeting to chat one on one or for group discussions around themes like movies.
In a recent demonstration, an online member in California invited a New York-based member to meet her on the beach. She drove up in a dune buggy with her dog in the back, picked up her guest and drove off chatting as they headed toward the digital horizon in a world that behaved, thanks to proprietary "distributed physics," like an earthly one with gravity and mass.

Other pursuits seem similarly gratifying. Creating a discussion group can be as simple as planting a flag saying "Movies" in the ground, beckoning to anyone who is interested to gather and talk.

In contrast to long-established game worlds like Ultima Online and EverQuest, with their overwhelmingly male audiences, there are no dragons and dungeons in There. But it is hardly devoid of fanciful landscapes, including Tiki, a tropical island, and Saja, a cloud city, both of which have proved to appeal to women.

"I got in there and had a ball running around," the disabled player, Ms. Gann, 38, of Oakdale, Tenn., said of the scores of hours she spent as an early tester in Tiki, where sounds of surf and birdsong are ever present. "It's so realistic that I felt like I was back running cross country for the track team."

For Lynn Johnson, a 44-year-old graphics artist in Huntsville, Ala., who has been a tester, the universe of There is a virtual reality hangout, a safe, friendly and familiar place where buddies, old and new, gather and chat. "It's not a game," she said. "It's not a chat room. It's really kind of hard to say what it is except maybe a virtual neighborhood."

What many players say they have liked most is the sense of freedom. Members can rent houses, give parties, join clubs and, using standard software like Adobe Photoshop or C++ programs, create new objects, animals and environments, There officials said.

There are some controls, Mr. Melcher added. For instance, no avatars can touch, unless they mutually agree to do so. Even then, touches are limited to a kiss. And no avatar can lie down or remove all of its clothing, for fairly obvious reasons.

An unanswered question is whether people will be willing to pay - and if so, how much - for this particular variety of ersatz reality. Mr. Melcher suggested that the service may require a monthly fee of perhaps $10. Amy Jo Kim, a There Inc. vice president, said the currency within the game might be purchased for an extra fee or earned - by working, for instance, as an activity leader.

As is the case in The Sims Online, product placement is intended to pay part of the freight. Nike and Levi Strauss have already signed on to offer online versions of their wares and services in There to which avatars can avail themselves.

Mr. Melcher said a great deal of research was done to create environments friendly to women, a group underrepresented in online...
virtual worlds. The philosophy, he said, was that if women came to There, men would follow. "The inverse is not necessarily true," he added.

A number of features are built into There to prevent the sort of harsh treatment and harassment that women often receive in chat rooms and online virtual worlds. One such control permits members to ignore an irritating avatar while replacing their own avatar with a computer-controlled fake.

Mr. Melcher also acknowledges that he is not certain what most members will want to do in There. During the next phase of its testing he said that There Inc. will closely watch what people want to do and try to help them further develop the virtual world and its tools.

There Inc., a four-year-old company based in Menlo Park, Calif., is now inviting consumers to register for a public test of the product by going to www.there.com. Mr. Melcher said he anticipated officially introducing the game in the third quarter of this year.

While There works well using a 56K dial-up connection to any Internet service provider, it requires computers equipped with no less than an 800-megahertz microprocessor, a high-performance graphics card and a Microsoft DirectX-compatible sound card.

But even with the hardware requirements, which are mostly met with modestly priced new computers, many experts say they believe a world like There will find an audience.

"People spend hours with their e-mail alone for entertainment, and people are getting familiar with big games in which thousands are participating," said Herbert Schorr, executive director of the Information Sciences Institute at the University of Southern California. "Something like this should be a greatly enriching experience for people. I think this will be the next step."

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