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The Future Of IT

A Look At Emerging Technology Trends In The SME

If you had asked an IT person 15 years ago about applying robots and virtual worlds in the enterprise, you probably would have at best gotten a wistful reaction. Back then, intraoffice email was considered innovative, and the majority of users accessing the Internet did so through AOL, CompuServe, or Prodigy.

“We are at the same phase with virtual worlds today as we were with the Internet back then,” says Rob Enderle, industry analyst with the Enderle Group (www.enderlegroup.com). “Instead of wandering through AOL’s protected gardens, we are now wandering within Second Life’s.”

So what emerging trends should you be anticipating? What will be commonplace in the IT world of 2023?

■ 2023? Try 2010!

Actually, many emerging trends should be accessible to the SME next year, if not sooner. Gartner Vice President Jackie Fenn, who gave a presentation on emerging trends at Gartner’s Symposium/ITxpo 2007, says 3D printing technology is falling in price, and by 2010, it should be cheap enough to drive an escalating demand for 3D computer modeling skills and services.

Companies such as Z Corporation (www.zcorp.com) already sell 3D printers for as low as \$20,000, making it affordable even for certain SMEs. Now a midsized architectural firm, for example, can purchase a small fabbing machine for about \$20,000 to \$30,000 that, with \$20 worth of material, can make a model in about an hour. Moreover, that firm can scan in the information needed to design the model and “fax” it to another machine 3,000 miles away, Fenn says.

As prices continue to fall for these machines, applications for them abound beyond mere modeling. It will soon be second nature to create spare plastic or metal parts with them. Fenn predicts that perhaps in several years, people might exchange avatars of their children or of their Second Life alter-egos rather than photos.