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Maldives Unveils World's First Virtual Embassy

22 May, Geneva & Second Life:

The Maldives today became the first country in the world to open a Virtual Embassy in Second Life, the online virtual world.

The Maldives Virtual Embassy will soon be followed by embassies representing Macedonia and the Philippines. Sweden has also announced plans to open a Virtual Embassy.

The Maldives Virtual Embassy is located in the Diplomatic Quarter of Diplomacy Island in Second Life, an on-line space designed to allow new avenues for diplomatic representation and negotiation, especially for small and developing countries that have limited diplomatic outreach in the “real” world. Diplomacy Island is the brainchild of Diplo Foundation, a non-profit organisation which works to assist developing countries participate meaningfully in international affairs.

The official inauguration ceremony took place simultaneously in the real world (Geneva) and in the virtual world (Second Life), with participants in both “place” and “space” able to watch the speeches, interact with each other, and explore the Maldives Embassy and the rest of Diplomacy Island.

The ceremony included addresses by Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President Designate of the UN General Assembly (speaking via the internet from New York), **Sergei Ordzhonikidze**, Director General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Mr. Abdulla Shahid, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives, Mr. Ambassador Walter Fust, Director of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Mr. Philip Rosedale, CEO of Linden Labs and Founder of Second Life (speaking from Silicon Valley), and Dr. Jovan Kurbalija, Director of Diplo Foundation.

Speaking ahead of the opening ceremony, which was hosted by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Maldives Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Abdulla Shahid emphasized how information technology and particularly the internet can be harnessed by small countries to help them participate meaningfully in international relations:

“The Maldives is a small country but that does not mean we do not have a valuable contribution to make in international affairs. The Maldives is well known as a tourist destination, but we are also a country that has experienced rapid economic, social and political development over recent years; while our vulnerability to sea-level rise has put us at the forefront of the global debate on climate change. The Virtual Embassy offers another channel for us to provide information on the country, to offer our viewpoint on issues of international concern, and to interact with our partners in the international community. I warmly welcome anyone interested in the Maldives to pay us a visit in Second Life”.

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Echoing these sentiments, Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President Designate of the UN General Assembly said “Modern diplomacy should follow the changes of today's world. One of the main and most profound changes is the development of the internet and new forms of communication. Diplo’s virtual diplomacy initiative, with Diplomacy Island and Virtual Embassies, heralds new developments in diplomatic practice.”

DiploFoundation’s Director and concept leader of Diplomacy Island, Dr. Jovan Kurbalija, noted that “the core of diplomacy is communication. When communication changes – as is happening now – diplomacy must adjust”. He also expressed his hope that Diplomacy Island will go some way towards addressing the “image deficit” of diplomacy. “In the modern world, thousands of museums celebrate wars and military victories, however there are no museums dedicated to diplomacy” he noted.

Second Life has 6.2 million users and has already become an established home for real-world companies (such as Toyota, Nike and General Motors), media outlets (e.g. Reuters, BBC Radio One), and universities (e.g. Princeton and Harvard).

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Notes for Editors

For more information on the inauguration ceremony and instructions about how to visit Diplomacy Island and Virtual Embassy of the Maldives, please visit:
<http://textus.diplomacy.edu/videovault/secondlife.asp>

For questions regarding the event call Eva Tanner at Diplo on +41 79 407 4119

Remarks by participants

H.E. Mr. Abdulla Shahid, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Maldives

“The Maldives is a small country but that does not mean we do not have a valuable contribution to make in international affairs. The Maldives is well known as a tourist destination, but we are also a country that has experienced rapid economic, social and political development over recent years; while our vulnerability to sea-level rise has put us at the forefront of the global debate on climate change. The Virtual Embassy offers another channel for us to provide information on the country, to offer our viewpoint on issues of international concern, and to interact with our partners in the international community. I warmly welcome anyone interested in the Maldives to pay us a visit in Second Life.”

H.E. Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President Designate of the UN General Assembly

“Modern diplomacy should follow the changes of today's world. One of the main and most profound changes is the development of the Internet and new forms of communication. The UN must be part of this process, if it wants to address the global population and reflect the needs of humanity. The UN should introduce new Internet-based tools both in order to modernize its working processes and to address the global population which is increasingly interacting via the Internet. Diplo's virtual diplomacy initiative, with Diplomacy Island and Virtual Embassies, heralds new developments in diplomatic practice.”

DiploFoundation's Director and concept leader of Diplomacy Island, Dr. Jovan Kurbalija

“The core of diplomacy is communication. When communication changes – as is happening now – diplomacy must adjust. Today more than one billion people use the Internet, and new applications are increasingly popular. For example, in many parts of the world public opinion is increasingly shaped through posting blogs. Diplo's project on Virtual Diplomacy addresses changes in communication through training, research and development of software tools. Diplomacy Island in Second Life is the latest project on virtual diplomacy, providing immediate solutions (virtual embassies) and also serving as an *in vivo* experiment of the future of diplomacy, including communication and negotiations.”

What is Diplomacy Island?

Diplomacy Island is the next step in over a decade of research and development in the field of Virtual Diplomacy. Through Second Life, DiploFoundation will explore new possibilities for diplomatic representation and negotiation. Diplomacy Island will be another channel for Diplo's main mission to assist small and developing countries to participate meaningfully in international relations. Diplomacy Island includes the following “neighbourhoods”:



- The Diplomatic Quarter will host virtual embassies. Along with the virtual embassies of Maldives, to be inaugurated on 22 May, several other embassies are under construction including embassies of Macedonia and Philippines.
- The Virtual Diplomatic Academy will host sessions and panels related to modern diplomacy and themes such as environmental diplomacy, energy diplomacy and cyber-diplomacy.
- The Virtual Diplomatic Museum will be more than a typical museum. Its main function will be to highlight the relevance of diplomacy to modern society, as opposed to the use of force. The Museum will present historical examples of the success of diplomacy. For example, in the specially organised events, visitors will have a chance to communicate “across time” with famous diplomats from the past including Talleyrand and Metternich.
- The Internet Governance Village will host panels, round table discussions and conferences on two sets of issues. First, of direct interest for Second Life citizens, the IG village will host discussions on privacy, security, digital identity and taxation in cyber-space. Second, the IG Village will promote discussions on Internet issues and developing countries, mainly on how to bridge the digital divide.

Speaking about the Diplomatic Museum, Dr. Kurbalija explained: “In the modern world, thousands of museums celebrate wars and military victories, however there are no museums dedicated to diplomacy. This may be a reflection of a broader problem; diplomacy’s “image deficit.” In many countries there is an ethical problem with the acceptance of “compromise,” the core of diplomacy. National cultures often cherish national pride, bravery, and other values linked to war and the military. However, in today’s day and age, compromise is no longer a matter of ethical choice. In an increasingly interdependent world, compromise has become indispensable to the basic functioning of modern society and its ultimate survival. Compromise is a method for solving increasingly complex environmental, security, and developmental problems. The main function of Virtual Diplomatic Museum will be to highlight the relevance of diplomacy and compromise throughout history. Maybe through vivid reflections on the Vienna Congress or a chat with Metternich, we may get ideas for solutions to today’s problems.”

The Virtual Embassy – Frequently Asked Questions

Like every novelty, the concept of the virtual embassy raises many questions, mostly related to how a virtual embassy might parallel the activities of a real embassy. Diplo’s research and experiments with virtual embassies began in 2000. Responses to some frequently asked questions are provided below. The launching of the virtual embassies of Maldives is sure to lead to discussion and the development of new options and possibilities for the functions of the virtual embassy.

What is a virtual embassy? When we call an embassy “virtual,” it means that this embassy does not have physical premises.

Does a virtual embassy have diplomats? Yes, it needs diplomats – people cannot be replaced by computers. In a real embassy, diplomats work from their embassy in the receiving state. In a virtual embassy, diplomats remain in the capital city of their own country and communicate with other countries through electronic means. “Virtual diplomats” need some specific skills,



including those relevant to Internet communication and “protocol” (appropriate writing style, netetiquette, etc.).

Will virtual embassies replace traditional ones? No. They will complement traditional embassies. Direct “face-to-face” contact, especially in conducting highly sensitive political negotiations, will remain the main diplomatic channel. Virtual embassies will become particularly relevant for small and developing countries which cannot afford to establish traditional embassies.

How is a virtual embassy different from the website of a diplomatic mission? The first difference is visual/graphical. A virtual embassy provides the “look and feel” of a real embassy and country. For example, the design of the Maldives Virtual Embassy is inspired by the luxury water villas to be found in Maldives tourist resorts. The second difference is that a virtual embassy provides real possibilities for interaction between diplomats and visitors. Diplomatic websites, on the other hand, are used mainly for providing information.

What diplomatic functions can a virtual embassy perform? It can perform almost any diplomatic function specified in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, from information dissemination, protection of interests of citizens abroad and negotiations, to investment promotion and more. The decision of the exact purpose for any virtual embassy will depend on the establishing government’s decision on how to use it. For small countries, decisions will be simple, driven by the impossibility to establish “real” missions.

To whom is a virtual embassy accredited? Here is the main difference between traditional embassies, which need to be accredited to particular countries or international organisations, and virtual embassies. A virtual embassy is “accredited” to cyberspace.

Can virtual embassies perform consular functions? Yes. Consular affairs are usually considered “computerisation friendly,” mainly because consular functions are clearly defined. They are repetitive and predictable activities that use standard procedures, decision-making criteria, and forms. With the growing mobility of people, including tourism and economic migration, there will likely be a growing need for virtual consular functions. The tools are available. It remains to be seen how this will be integrated in the policy and organisation of diplomatic services.

What is DiploFoundation?

DiploFoundation is a non-profit organisation which works to assist all countries, particularly those with limited human and financial resources, to participate meaningfully in international affairs, through education and training programs, research, and the development of information and communications technologies for diplomatic activities.

DiploFoundation grew from a project to introduce information technology tools to the practice of diplomacy, initiated in 1993 at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies in Malta, to an independent foundation established in November 2002 by the governments of Malta and Switzerland. The organisation’s focus has expanded from the application of information technology to diplomacy, to include other new and traditional aspects of the practice of diplomacy and international relations.



DiploFoundation is based in Malta, with offices in Geneva and Belgrade.

What is Second Life?

Second Life (SL) is a fast-growing virtual community with more than six million “citizens.” It has its own currency, the Linden Dollar, which can be exchanged for US dollars. SL citizens own property, socialize, learn and interact in SL. Most leading companies – including Nike, General Motors and Toyota – have a presence in SL. More than 60 universities, including Harvard and Stanford, have established campuses in SL. News agencies (including Reuters) are also in SL, and BBC Radio One even rents an island in SL to stage pop concerts. Almost all aspects of real life have their replica in SL.

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), which hosted and partnered the Virtual Diplomacy event, is an international foundation that was established in 1995 under Swiss law to "promote the building and maintenance of peace, security and stability". The GCSP was founded by the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports, in cooperation with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, as a Swiss contribution to Partnership for Peace.