
newstory

Living a virtual life

A whole new world

Have you ever wished that you could change your appearance, build your own house or set up a business? Well now you can do all this and more without ever leaving home. Created by Californian firm, Linden Lab, *Second Life* has become the latest internet phenomenon in the UK and has millions of users across the globe. Players can join the website and create their own onscreen graphic character or 'avatar'. So if you've ever wondered what it would be like to be taller, more stylish or even a different gender, then here's your chance. In fact, *Second Life* isn't really a game in the traditional sense; there are no dragons to slay or dungeons to escape from. Its founder, Philip Rosedale, says instead that he's aiming to 'build a new country', where people can make just about anything from scratch.

Living the dream

Second Life users or 'residents' can use a virtual currency called Linden Dollars to buy land and develop it in any way they choose. Nottingham computer programmer, Jim Purbrik, says this is one of the things that sets *Second Life* apart from other online games. 'It's a virtual world built by the people who use it'. The potential for advertising has caught

the attention of businesses. Toyota is giving away free virtual cars and Nike has developed special trainers helping avatars to run faster. Pop stars are also getting involved, with British 80's group Duran Duran buying an island so they can perform online. 'I'm constantly inspired by what people are building here,' says British *Second Life* resident, Jon Kossman.

Virtual business, real money

What's more, residents also own their own creations so it's possible to make real life money too. Through her avatar Anshe Chung, Chinese-born Ailin Goh has created a property empire in *Second Life* where Linden Dollars can be exchanged for real money. Meanwhile, Brit, Chris Mead, is making about £1,000 a week by charging other players to use his specially created software, which allows avatars to cuddle.

But it's not just the chance to meet people, make money and build things that's attracting 8,000 new users to the site every day. Virtual worlds like *Second Life* may also become the classrooms of the future, enabling people to study just about anything at any time. So living a virtual life could help us in real life too.