

## Just like life, but better, say fans of virtual worlds

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

For a computer-generated community, Second Life is a lot like the real world.

Residents can talk to their friends, buy a home or go to church. They can use real money that is converted to Linden dollars ? the currency in Second Life ? and buy a car or a cup of coffee.

There are virtual wrongdoings and a band of justice seekers that weed out violators.

But the coffee isn't real. Neither is the car, the home and the church. It's a virtual world where real people live any life they want.

In Second Life, users can create their own identities, called avatars, and set up a virtual life with whatever name, job, house and social network they want.

Online worlds, such as Second Life, Active Worlds and There, are popular because they're built around the fantasy of designing a more glamorous and exciting environment.

"Who doesn't sit around and dream how they could make their life better?" Columbus psychologist Craig Travis said. "You have an opportunity to learn and take risks, but it's minimal risk."

Virtual worlds have millions of residents. Anybody can buy property and set up a business on Second Life. Residents sell items for Linden dollars, which they can exchange for real money.

Second Life's economy is booming. Created in 2003 by San Francisco-based Linden Lab, a private company that develops 3-D entertainment, it has nearly 4 million residents. Roughly \$1 million in real money was spent on virtual activities in a recent 24-hour period, according to Second Life's Web site.

Public agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration have a presence on Second Life, as well as brands including Adidas and Circuit City.

It's free to sign up with one basic account, but there's a fee for additional accounts. Plus, if members want to buy anything or set up businesses, they need to pay U.S. dollars to get Linden dollars.

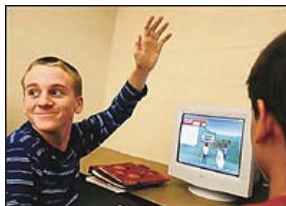
Columbus real-estate broker George Byrd read about Second Life in a magazine and joined in June under the avatar Bizarre Berry. He quickly realized the world's potential to bring people with common interests together.

Active in real life in the Unitarian Universalist church, Byrd, 37, wondered whether people would join a virtual church. He bought some land and built the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Second Life in August.

The membership grew from 100 members in December to 215 now. The church has worship services twice a week. Members can have discussions, give readings and make monetary offerings. The church's board of directors, all Second Life residents, will decide what to do with the money.

"I may have created this place, but the people come of their own free will," Byrd said.

There are several real-life church members who are disabled and can't get out to attend services, but they can go as often as they want in Second Life.



MICHAEL P. KING

Some schools, such as Alexander Middle in Albany, Ohio, use virtual worlds in lessons. Alan Stalder, an eighthgrader there, plays Rafting Adventure, a program designed by Ohio University graduate students.