

Virtual worlds take over the online world

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You could be forgiven for thinking that virtual worlds had disappeared. Since the hype around Second Life last year there has been a dearth of mainstream publicity, as if they had all gone from virtual to invisible. In fact a lot is happening. Any moment now Habbo Hotel, a space for teenagers, will overtake the all-conquering World of Warcraft by having 10 million active users a month. It actually has 100 million registered users, bigger than most countries, but the monthly total is a better indicator of activity. These are the two biggest virtual games. The third is [RuneScape.com](#), which has grown from nowhere a few years ago to more than 6 million active players, of which 1 million are paying subscribers. At the weekend there were 138,000 players all on at once (well over twice Second Life's concurrent users). Interestingly, all three companies are "European". RuneScape is British, based in Cambridge; Habbo Hotel is Finnish and World of Warcraft, though a US game, is owned by the French group Vivendi. If the virtual revolution is all it is cracked up to be, will Europe breed the likes of Yahoo, eBay and Amazon? It hasn't made a bad start.

There is more to come. Entropia Universe of Sweden has 700,000 players, including entrepreneurs making small fortunes, even though its complex rules are a turn-off for some. Entropia is building the first stage of the awesome Beijing Recreation District which alone will be capable of hosting more than 15m avatars, making it the biggest virtual world on the planet. This is the first stage of a huge Chinese plan to dominate virtual worlds in the way that they have taken over manufacturing. Another European world is Twinity of Germany - not yet public - which mashes virtual worlds with real cities, including New York. My avatar has an apartment in Berlin, though I have not yet figured out how to open the front door. One neat feature is that you can upload a photo of yourself (front and side views) to paste on to your avatar to make it more lifelike.

An interesting British start-up I have already written about, ([footballsuperstars](#)), is launching soon. It claims to be the world's first dedicated virtual football game in which players from around the world can play in a field or a stadium or sample the football lifestyle in a local bar. If they get the gaming right, there is clearly global potential and success could propel virtual worlds into the mainstream. It is a symptom of Europe's importance that this year London will host two virtual world conferences, [virtualworldsforum.com](#) (at London Bridge, starting October 6), while its US rival is at the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre on October 20 to 21.

Second Life has gone ex-growth, judging by the number of avatars online simultaneously (it rarely exceeds 64,000) but it is the place to be for experimentation. Universities and companies are still piling in, especially as SL is adopting open source and allows companies to bolt their own servers on. Nielsen Online figures show that Second Life is the third most popular application in the UK in terms of

minutes spent on it (after Facebook and YouTube) with growth of 137% in the past year. The only other virtual world in the top 10 was Disney's Club Penguin, which claims 4 million users. This is one of an exploding number of sites aimed at younger people that which will provide an expanding base of people ready for grown-up virtual worlds later. Others include dizzywood.com, barbiegirls.com, revnjenz.com (a racing game), Webkinz and imvu.com, a kind of 3D chat room which claims 20m registrations, including 600,000 active ones.

Sites such as there.com have attracted corporations into its walled garden for youngsters and there is a buzz around the launch of metaplace.com, which will offer you a virtual world of your own. The virtual revolution is only just beginning.

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