

Second Life: real life?

On Monday, I sat outside my penthouse sipping cocktails and enjoying the view of the waterfall below. On Tuesday, I freefall over the plains of the Serengeti, feeling a tight knot in my stomach as my parachute fails to open. Although there is the unmistakable taste of fear in my mouth, I am safe in the knowledge that by Wednesday I could be back at the penthouse if I want to be – as I am not in my normal life, but in my [Second Life](#).

Participation in virtual worlds is growing, with Second Life boasting over nine million 'residents' and estimates that by 2011, 80% of Internet users will join a [virtual world](#), where they can buy property, have relationships and hold a job. Crucially, however, people can **do more** in virtual worlds without the restraints of reality. It is a world of opportunity.

Will virtual worlds become our new reality?

Businesses are taking an increasingly serious attitude towards virtual worlds, and not just for straightforward commercial opportunities. Reuters has a Second Life correspondent covering the hundreds of thousands of [virtual dollars](#) exchanged every month. [Anshe Chung](#), a former language teacher from China, has accrued more than US\$1million by selling virtual real estate. Her wealth has attracted unsavoury attention and she has been subject to violent virtual attacks. That the attacks happened in cyberspace is significant, experiments by the [American Psychological Association](#) have shown that such incidents have real emotional impacts. Because of this, Second Life has been used to help [cure Asperger's syndrome](#).

It goes further, with technological breakthroughs such as [Virtual Clones](#) integrating the 'real' person with the 'virtual' – not a new concept, having appeared in science fiction novels such as Tad William's *Otherland* almost a decade ago – and an increasing convergence between [technologies and behaviours](#).

Sceptics say such developments are just hype, pointing out that [five of six](#) Second Life users are not active and that almost all [35 million users](#) of virtual worlds simply play games. Should the more fantastical story of virtual worlds be left to science fiction writers? For many users, the experience is a disposable leisure activity. Users have also described Second Life as being too commercial, implying that it is little more than a business opportunity.

Yet the future may see groups using virtual worlds as a catalyst for profound change in the real world. Change could be as alarming as [organising terrorist activities](#), or as hopeful as finding medical cures and [building the hospital of the future](#) – even if each latest manifestation is, by its very nature, just the latest fashion or just a game.