



# Berlin 2.0

AS THE GERMAN CAPITAL FINDS A SECOND LIFE ONLINE, GERMAN VISITORS AND BUSINESSES ARE EXPECTED TO JOIN IN, ODER?



**BY JONATHAN MILES** It's a bright but breezy day as I turn the corner into Alexanderplatz, the trees are rustling in the wind, and a light smattering of cloud obscures my view of the top of the TV tower. After stopping at Olle Bolle for a *Berliner Weisse* (green, please), I decide to go up the tower and take in the view. One bumpy elevator ride later and I get to the observation deck, and R2D2 comes over and gives me a brandy. Hang on, R2D2? This is getting a little bit surreal. A quick look around and I discover there's actually a base jumping platform right at the top, but how do I get up there? Ah, teleport, of course. A few seconds later and I'm peering over the edge, but I can't see a thing. Then I slip, and I'm falling, falling, falling through the clouds. Ah, there's the view I was hoping for. As I plummet, I realise I'm still holding the *Berliner Weisse* and suddenly feel like a tourist. I make a mental note to get rid of it if I survive the fall. But wait. This, of course, isn't really Alexanderplatz. Nor is it a *Berliner Weisse*-in-

duced bad dream. It's newBERLIN - a 'full size' replica of Berlin being built inside Second Life.

In case you've spent the last year on Mars, SL is a virtual online world. Partially inspired by the 'metaverse' concept from Neal Stephenson's classic cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, it's a 3-D world where users buy land, create buildings and objects and interact with other users. You install a program on your computer, sign up (basic accounts are free), and off you go. The range of activities is wide: Harvard University runs classes there, IBM has an SL headquarters. You can see virtual gigs by Oasis or watch Richard Dawkins give a talk. Sweden has an embassy there.

But for many the most compelling aspect is the money. SL has its own currency which is exchangeable for real US dollars, and so thousands of would-be virtual entrepreneurs are trying to figure out how to turn virtual assets into greenbacks. Users sell objects they've created, and virtual pros-

titution is rife - the sex industry is always an early adopter of new technology. And the corporate branding opportunities are endless. There is a whole industry developing around providing an SL presence for real-life companies.

Germany has taken to Second Life like a polygon duck to virtual water. A recent survey by web statistic gatherers comScore has revealed that 16 percent of SL users are German, making them the biggest group of users by nationality, just ahead of the US. Perhaps the inspiration for this is SL virtual property magnate Anshe Chung, who made the front cover of *Business Week* magazine last year, and claims to be a dollar millionaire purely from trading in property in the virtual world. In real life she's Ailin Graef, an ex-schoolteacher from Frankfurt.

'I think Germans perhaps take it more seriously than others,' says newBERLIN co-founder Jan Northoff. 'We've had a lot of press here about the

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business side of SL. We recognise that it's not like a game, and we think hey, someone got rich with this.' Northoff and his partner Tobias Neisecke head a team of 10 people who work on the newBERLIN project. Working from city plans, photos and measurements, they are painstakingly recreating the entire city of Berlin (albeit with some surreal twists), a process they accept may take 10 years or more. At the moment the areas they have completed exist as separate disjointed 'islands' but as the work progresses they will join them together to make one huge seamless city. Northoff says he's an artist first and a businessman second, and his previous life as part of the conceptual design project *dailydigital.org* appears to back up this claim. But there's no denying that he and his team are in it for the money. They have a sales team to market the slew of virtual real estate in the new city and are approaching medium to large compa-

nies first, although they say they're happy to hear from anyone interested in setting up shop in newBERLIN, no matter how small. 'We need to take care of the creative people too,' says Northoff. 'It's important to bring in all aspects of city life.' So far it seems to be working. Supermarket chain Plus is among the tenants, and they've recreated the new Alexa mall in a deal which has provided them with a real shop in the real shopping centre. According to Northoff, several other big names are in the pipeline, and there is strong interest from venture capitalists, although he says he can't reveal details just yet. So is SL anything more than the latest online fad, destined to go the same way as the dancing baby? The honeymoon is over as far as the journo-geek community is concerned. Last year *Wired* magazine was printing SL travel and business guides. Now it's claiming that 85 percent of users abandon



the world after a week because there's nothing to sustain any interest.

Northoff admits there is still a lack of real depth in SL, but is not put off. 'When email was new, I got an account, but it was unused for about a year. But eventually people started asking me for my address, and now I use it all the time. I think it will be the same with SL. As the content improves, those people will come back and start using their accounts.'

The future for SL and the projects within is set to be a race between the creativity of its inhabitants and the notoriously low boredom threshold of the average Internet user. 'The opportunities are the strongest force in SL,' says Northoff. Can newBERLIN turn those opportunities into (virtual) reality?

newBERLIN: [www.berlininsl.de](http://www.berlininsl.de)