More real people leading virtual lives
By JAMES H. BURNETT III
Jared Freedman is not a member of a Masonic lodge on Earth.

But in the metaverse, the rapidly expanding universe of virtual worlds springing up on the Internet, Freedman's avatar, a three-dimensional graphical representation of him named Ancient Shriner, is leader of a virtual Masonic lodge.

Gone are the days when the only people who hung out in computer-generated fantasy worlds were characters in The Matrix and lonely kids who couldn't get dates.

We're talking real people spending real money to lead alternate lives in Internet-based communities as avatars who move and talk in real time, like the real people they represent.

Among the most popular virtual worlds: Second Life (secondlife.com), which has about 6.2 million residents, There (There.com), which has about 750,000, Whyville (Whyville.com), with 2.27 million and Habbo Hotel (Habbo.com) which has about 50 million worldwide.

"There are tens of millions of people worldwide who live in virtual worlds and take them very seriously as a new means of entertainment, communication and social interaction," says Beth Coleman, a professor of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is writing a book on virtual worlds and their occupants.

``The biggest difference in this and the kids 10 or 15 years ago who played fantasy role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons, and, later, the people who engaged in multiplayer online role-playing games, is you can't really characterize current users as geeks or loners. These are people with lives, real friends.''

Freedman, a 40-year-old software developer in Surfside, discovered Second Life in fall 2005.

After scrutinizing the site for a few months, he registered and moved in. His first order of business: create an avatar.

Freedman, bearded with short, curly black hair, is five-foot-eight and 180 pounds.Ancient Shriner stands a skinny six feet and has a long white beard.

"Different, huh?" Freedman asks. ``You create avatars to represent a part of you, and that part might not have anything to do with your actual appearance. In my case, my grandfather was a 33rd-degree Mason. . . . He sort of looked like Uncle Sam. So I

designed my avatar to look like them -- my grandfather and Uncle Sam -- and I came up with that handle of Ancient Shriner."

While most of the other Second Lifers Freedman/Ancient Shriner met were building virtual homes and acquiring virtual clothes and accessories for their avatars, Freedman built Second Life's first Masonic lodge.

"The funny thing is I became known as a Mason," Freedman says. 'So I started this lodge, gave myself the made-up title of `Masterful Sage,' [and] began meeting other people."

Michael Cai, a Web technology analyst with Parks Associates in Dallas, says the virtual world population has been booming for about two years.

Cai, who describes virtual worlds as the convergence of old-fashioned chatrooms, networking sites like MySpace.com and games like World of Warcraft, says their attraction is the ability to create an almost fully functional avatar.

"If you think about it, it's the next best thing to physically being in the same room with that other person," he says.

Still, as Freedman illustrates, avatars don't always look like their creators.

A recent survey of 9,529 Second Lifers by Seattle-based Global Market Insite found that 45 percent give their avatars more attractive bodies, 37 percent make them younger than themselves, and 23 percent give them another race.

The transformation isn't so drastic for Caridad Jorge, 24, a Miami real-estate coordinator, but she understands the temptation to alter one's look, because "it's a game. You make yourself look the way you want." Jorge is five-foot-five and fair, with dark brown hair. In There.com, her avatar Coralline is tan, taller and slimmer.

Coralline plays virtual spades at other avatars' virtual houses and goes on scavenger hunts that take her inside virtual backyards and even to detailed virtual versions of such places as Paris or the Pyramids.

"I've never wanted to build a house in There," Jorge says. ``For me this was a way to really go somewhere else and do things and visit places I might never have time or money for in the real world."

MIT's Coleman says that until a few years ago most virtual-world residents were the same folks playing fantasy games featuring knights, dragons and wizards, so their avatars were ``very fantastical."

"But the trend has been toward more realistic representations," she says, ``because more people are now trying to escape not who they are -- what they look like, I mean -- but where they spend their time."

Twenty-two percent of Second Lifers polled by GMI said they had more virtual-world than real-world friends, and 29 percent said their virtual lives interfered with their real lives.

And even though a meaningful virtual-world life requires a lot of time, Coleman says she doesn't believe it carries the addiction danger of virtual multiplayer games, because simply living online isn't competitive.

One newer benefit of virtual living is money.

"There is a great deal to be made," says Jay Yarbrough, who lives near Tampa. ``I joined There.com in February 2004. . . . My avatar Thumdar has made lots of friends and goes interesting places. We even started a website within the virtual world, Thumdar.com, that studies what goes on in There. But what I found was as many people were becoming interested in virtual worlds, not many had the technical savvy to fully develop the avatars they wanted."

Yarbrough/Thumdar began meeting others who wanted their avatars not just to have dark hair, but long, wavy dark hair. They wanted 3D cars with all the trimmings and virtual hot tubs with virtual flat-screen TVs.

Thinking "Pimp my avatar," Yarbrough offered his "techspertise" and was quickly making a nice side income, he says, adding he knows other techies who earn $100,000-plus giving avatar upgrades.

Surfside's Freedman, who owns Code4Software, developed such a reputation for the virtual lodge he built that in March, Coldwell Banker hired him to build its virtual headquarters.

And Rick Schwartz, an Internet entrepreneur in Boca Raton who made a fortune dealing in website domain names in the early days of the Internet, moved to a virtual world last fall strictly for the money.

"Honestly, I've made my living online for a lot of years," Schwartz says with a laugh. ``So I was not interested in making friends. I wanted income."

Schwartz went to Montreal-based Weblo.com, which hosts a 2D virtual copy of Earth. He purchased the virtual state of Florida for $18,000, named himself governor and promptly bought more than 120 cities ranging in price from $20 to several hundred dollars.

Now, Schwartz, who is just starting to develop interactive features for visitors to his Florida, gets a cut from Weblo.com any time a virtual resident of that world pays for an upscale membership to live in virtual Florida.

Michael Wilson, CEO of Makena Technologies and one of the creators of eBay, says the virtual world is a gold mine, but most residents don't want to make money.

``They just want something to do,''says Wilson, whose company created There.com and developed Virtual Hills and Virtual Laguna Beach for MTV for fans who wanted to sample life as seen on the reality shows The Hills and Laguna Beach.

"People simply want to meet each other and have their digital images, their avatars, be able to do the same things they might in the real world," Wilson says.