

Publishing Editor's column

ONE OF THE defining features of the twenty-first century so far has been the Internet, and most of us reading these words will recognise both the benefits gained from its use and the problems it brings about. Many of us rely on it to a considerable extent as a source of information and means of communication, whilst being vaguely aware of the force for evil it has also become, which ranges from the purveying of pornography to the all-too-easy spreading of gossip and rumour.

A new aspect of the Internet that came to my notice recently has prompted a few thoughts. The alarming extent to which computer games are part of some people's lives, especially young men, has previously been the subject of attention in this magazine, but an extensive article in *Newsweek* a few weeks ago on Second Life opened my eyes to an alarming leap forward in the ability of the Internet to take over people's lives. Second Life is an Internet-based virtual reality world, that is, an imaginary world created on computer and which has an astonishing realism about it. You enter this world by creating an avatar for yourself, an avatar being an imaginary personality. This personality can be whatever you want yourself to be: a woman who considers herself to be ugly and unattractive can be glamorous; a man in an unfulfilling and poorly rewarded job can be a prosperous businessman. Once created, this alternative personality moves in a world appropriate to that personality and interacts with others, but of course only when you switch on the computer and log on to Second Life via the Internet.

Like me before I read the article, you may not have been aware of Second Life, but if forecasts work out we soon will be much more aware of it. It was launched in 2001, but membership has only really taken off this year. The introduction of similar software is being planned by various media companies. According to the *Newsweek* article, the well-respected business research organisation Gartner Research predicts: "By 2011 four out of five people who use the Internet will actively participate in Second Life or some similar medium". It is something which can take over people's lives. A recent study has found that fifty-seven per cent of Second Life users spend more than eighteen hours a week on it, some much more. Second Life does have other uses than simply providing fantasy worlds for people

to live in; it is increasingly being used in the business and educational fields, for example. How it all works I cannot begin to understand, but what matters is that it is here to stay.

It is time to think of the implications of this new development for ourselves. Setting aside any positive benefits that it could have, there are very real dangers in getting involved in Second Life because it cuts across what should be fundamental principles of living the Truth. People use Second Life to escape from the realities of life into a world in which things are as you want them to be rather than as they are. For example, people use it to escape from the reality of an unsatisfactory actual relationship to create a new and more satisfying relationship with another person's on-screen personality, or to see how much money they can make (not in reality, of course) by adopting the personality of a business tycoon.

The danger of all this to our spiritual lives ought to be obvious. Life is not about escaping its realities into a fantasy world, it is about trying to develop Christlike characters in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The idea of finding fulfilment and interest in a 'second life', which we enter and leave when we feel like it, is mere vanity; we should be seeking the second life which God has promised us for the future if we are faithful servants. This life to come will be infinitely more fulfilling than anything that can be entered via a computer, and it will last for ever.

Unsatisfactory situations in life need to be faced up to and dealt with in a Christlike spirit, and to be accepted if they cannot be resolved, not escaped from through a computer screen, or for that matter through other forms of escapism that people use, whether the spiritual energy-sapping means of the various forms of entertainment that are available or the life-destroying means of drugs and alcohol. We cannot envisage the Apostle Paul trying to escape the daily "care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28) in a Second Life identity were he around today, for he had "learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content", saying, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:11,13). Character is developed by contact with real people in real-life situations, especially brethren and sisters in the ecclesial environment, and escaping into a virtual reality world from time to time only makes it more difficult to do this.

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