SAN FRANCISCO/NEW YORK (Reuters) - Reuters is opening a news bureau in the simulation game Second Life this week, joining a race by corporate name brands to take part in the hottest virtual world on the Internet.

Starting on Wednesday, Reuters plans to begin publishing text, photo and video news from the outside world for Second Life members and news of Second Life for real world readers who visit a Reuters news site at: http://secondlife.reuters.com/.

Created by Linden Lab in San Francisco, Second Life is the closest thing to a parallel universe existing on the Internet. Akin to the original city-building game SimCity, Second Life is a virtual, three-dimensional world where users create and dress up characters, buy property and interact with other players.

More than 900,000 users have signed up to build homes, form neighborhoods and live out alternative versions of their lives in the 3D, computer-generated world. Players spend around US$350,000 a day on average, or a rate of $13 million a year. Usage is growing in rapid double-digit terms each month.

Players buy and sell goods and services using a virtual currency, known as Linden Dollars. An online marketplace allows users to convert the currency into real U.S. dollars, enabling users to earn real money from their activities.

Adam Pasick, a Reuters' media correspondent based in London, will serve as the news organization's first virtual bureau chief, using a personal avatar, or animated character, called "Adam Reuters," in keeping with the game's naming system.

"As strange as it might seem, it's not that different from being a reporter in the real world," Pasick said. "Once you get used to it -- it becomes very much like the job I have been doing for years."
Car maker Toyota, music label Sony BMG, computer maker Sun Microsystems, and technology news company Cnet are among the companies taking part in Second Life. Adidas and American Apparel sell clothes and accessories for people to dress their avatars. Starwood Hotels has built a virtual version of "aloft," a new hotel chain it plans to open in the real world in 2008.

Reuters will have journalists reporting and writing financial and cultural stories within and about Second Life as part of the London-based company's strategy to reach new audiences with the latest digital technologies.

"In Second Life, we're making Reuters part of a new generation," Reuters Chief Executive Tom Glocer said in a statement. "We're playing an active role in this community by bringing the outside world into Second Life and vice versa."

Second Life citizens can stay tuned to the latest headlines by using a feature called the Reuters News Center, a mobile device that users can carry inside the virtual environment. Stories will focus on both the fast-growing economy and culture of Second Life and also include links to Reuters news feeds from the outside world, ranging from Baghdad to Wall Street.

Pasick said Reuters was not bending any editorial rules to operate in a world that blends fiction with reality.

"Being unbiased, being accurate, being fast, all the things that Reuters strives for, they hold true in just about any environment in which you would want to report the news," he said.

Residents of Second Life who read a Reuters story that interests them can, with the click of a button, go to a community center called Reuters Atrium to meet others to discuss the latest events in both the real and virtual worlds.

(Read an interview with Pasick at: http://blogs.reuters.com/mediafile/)