

Scot says 'I'm in' as Dragons' Den goes online

Asian millionaire helps launch show's new format

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IT IS one of the most memorable television catchphrases of recent times, often delivered in the grumpy, slightly scary voice of Scot Duncan Bannatyne: "I'm out."

Now an internet version of the reality show Dragons' Den is being launched with a new Scots Dragon at the helm.

The online version of the show will work in exactly the same way as the television show: a succession of trembling contestants will pitch what they think is a good idea to a panel of business people with £50,000 each to invest.

Some will get the cash and the chance of an exciting and rich future; others will leave with nothing apart from dashed hopes.

The show's new Scottish Dragon is Edinburgh businessman Shaf Rasul, who runs E-Net Computers Ltd, which distributes blank DVDs.

He's one of the richest Asians in the UK. Mr Rasul was actually offered the

chance to appear on the television show two years ago but turned it down because he was too busy; now he's glad he's finally getting his wings as a Dragon.

In fact he was only on the programme for a few minutes when he began waving his wad of £50,000 around – he invested in the very first person who pitched to him.

"The entrepreneur had such a belief in his product so I decided to invest," he said yesterday. "My first criteria was, 'Do I like this person? Can I work with them?'"

The online Den features another new Dragon, Julie Meyer, an internet technology entrepreneur, and a new presenter, Dominic Byrne from BBC Radio 1.

Bannatyne and the other Dragons are famous for their unsmiling demolition of anyone with a poor idea, but Mr Rasul says the new version will be a little more fun.

"We have made it a lot more lively," he said. "It's a lighter atmosphere. It will appeal to



IN THE DEN: Shaf Rasul and Julie Meyer are the two Dragons featured in the online version of the television programme, with the original Dragons below. Picture: BBC



a younger demographic than the TV show."

This does not mean the new Den is unrealistic about what the business world is like at the moment – far from it. Mr Rasul has a fortune of

around £100m but admits the economic crisis has tightened his grip on the £50,000 he has to spend on the show.

"I want a lot more equity before I invest," he said. "Perhaps I would have settled

for 10% a year ago but now I want 30% or more. Businesses are worth a lot less than a year ago."

Anyone who has watched an episode knows a lot of the guilty joy of Dragons' Den is seeing people with a patently absurd idea get torn apart, but Mr Rasul says he was impressed with the standard of what he saw.

"A lot of the ideas were good," he said. "We are in the middle of a recession but a lot of people are coming up with ideas that could create jobs."

He also believes the show can improve the image of business: "It explains to the general public what it's like to be an entrepreneur and a lot

more people understand business more because of the programme. I'm a firm believer that TV will move to the web; this is a cutting-edge idea and I wanted to a part of it."

Mario Dubois, executive producer of Dragons' Den Online, added that the idea was an important extension of the brand for the BBC.

"It's a major step forward for content on the web," he said. "The Dragons' Den brand is massively successful on television, but this is a significant brand extension from TV into the digital arena, which enables the audience to take part and contribute."

Some things will not change: the brilliantly-ecce-

tric Evan Davis will not be there but Dominic Byrne will still be doing those post-humiliation/jubilation interviews.

"I'll be talking to all the entrepreneurs, finding out how they got the idea for their invention," he said.

Mr Rasul has some advice for those entering: "You've got to know what you're taking about and you've got to know the numbers inside out."

Do that and you might hear the words: "I'm in."

The online Dragons' Den begins on March 30 with a new episode being put up once a week thereafter.