

Second Life: Real Libraries in a Virtual world
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Librarians at the University of Kentucky have been working in the virtual world application Second Life since January, 2007. In this session we will describe our work on international collaborative projects and our efforts within the state and at UK to develop a local presence in the virtual world. We will provide an introduction to Second Life and discuss pitfalls and challenges as well as real and anticipated benefits. The particular projects discussed include: Our work on the first virtual college fair in Second Life; an exhibit of UK Libraries' archival material in the virtual world; our use of this new technology to collaborate and network with librarians and other educators. We will also talk about development of the new University of Kentucky "island" which opened in Second Life in December, 2007.

As information professionals, it is so important for us to be familiar with emerging trends like virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are more than just a fad. A recent Gartner report indicates that 80% of Internet users will have a virtual world presence by 2011.

Second Life is one popular example of a 3-D virtual world. Launched in 2003 by Linden Labs, Second Life is unique as it is entirely user-built. Everything you see in Second Life is built by its users, or “residents.” There are over one million residents in Second Life, though usually tens of thousands are logged in at a given time. What are they all doing? In Second Life, you can basically do anything you can do in real life—make friends, attend classes, start a business, have a home, go dancing—pretty much anything you can imagine. Cities in Second Life are much like real life in that you can go to malls, galleries, libraries, clubs—again, pretty much like real cities. In addition to the day-to-day and ordinary aspects of life, the more compelling is possible. Flying around is commonplace, and teleporting is the way to travel from one location to another.

The purpose of Second Life is largely for social interaction. Second Life is not a game, as there is no ultimate goal. Second Life is fun and a lot of people use it for fun. But Second Life is increasingly being used for educational purposes, whether attending conferences, holding class sessions, or creating interactive exhibits. The possibilities for education or communication are huge. Second Life is a new way to interact with information, with the potential to revolutionize the way we access information as dramatically as the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Second Life is the 3-D web. It is a new platform for communicating information.

Getting Started

So how does one get started in Second Life? Users are represented in Second Life by avatars, so one of the first things you’ll need to do is set up an avatar. You can do this by going to www.secondlife.com. The first thing you’ll have to do is create a free account and choose a name for your avatar. You can create the first name and then select the last name from a list of names. Despite being able to change the appearance of your avatar, the avatar name is the one thing you cannot change in Second Life.

At this point you will need to download the client software in order to access Second Life. You will need a fairly new computer to run Second Life. You can find the required specs and other information on the Second Life website. Once you have logged into the client software, you will want to go through the orientation process. This is very important, as orientation will teach you how to maneuver through Second Life—how to pick up objects, fly, etc.

At this point you can also customize your avatar but you don’t want to spend a significant amount of time doing this. Once you finish the orientation and move out into the real world, you will have many opportunities to find free outfits for customizing your avatar as well as trade objects with others. The social nature of creating and sharing objects is one of the unique aspects of Second Life.

Education and the Teen Grid

There are other virtual world applications, but Second Life is one of the best-suited to education. Hopefully one day, Second Life will function more like the internet with distributed servers that run according to standards but are locally controlled. But currently Second Life is operated by a single company, and that company is concerned with liability that could come with underage access to adult-themed content. So Linden Lab has restricted access to the “main grid” of Second Life to users who are at least 18 years old. They have created a “teen grid” for users under 18, but that world is completely separate. Users can’t travel or exchange objects between the two grids. Educators can access the teen grid, after a background check and only if they are affiliated with an approved educational project. But the age split is still a problem for education using Second Life. High school and college classes can have students that span that age split, or end up moving from the teen grid to the main grid in mid semester. So this is a problem that is widely discussed but currently not resolved.



In the meantime, educators are working on the teen grid and doing exciting things. For example, Eye4You Alliance Island on the teen grid is an island sponsored by the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County. One of the big projects they have supported for the past two years is a virtual college fair in Teen Second Life. See <http://sllibrarians.ning.com/video/video/show?id=650964:Video:10502> for a video tour from the first fair in 2007. Just like a “real” college

fair, a virtual college fair allows College representatives and prospective students to get together to share information. The virtual environment makes it possible to attend without leaving home, allowing representatives to promote their institutions outside a normal geographic recruiting zone and allowing students to talk with representatives from schools that might not otherwise come to their town or state or country.

The University of Kentucky in Second Life



At the time that the University of Kentucky participated in the 2007 College Fair we did not have an island in Second Life. We started talking about creating a Second Life presence for the University of Kentucky in the fall of 2007. There were several of us from a variety of colleges and departments on campus who were enthusiastic about the educational possibilities of Second Life. There are a lot of different ways universities manage Second Life islands. In our case, Undergraduate

Studies provides the funding for the project and the Teaching & Academic Support Center manages the island. We have various groups of faculty, staff and students who serve on policy and planning committees and work as builders and event coordinators.

Our island includes areas or parcels representing different projects. We have a video tour of the island available on our island blog (<http://ukisland.wordpress.com/2008/06/02/tour-of-university-of-ky-island-in-second-life/>), where you can have a brief look at some of those areas. We tried to provide some general island cohesion by creating teleport towers, pathways, and signs to make it easy for visitors to get around. Other than those infrastructure elements, however, the different parcels were created because we had people on campus who were interested in creating them. So we have a library because librarians at UK wanted to build one. The “selection” of departments on the island is a direct result of the personnel involved.

One area on the island that has drawn a lot of attention is our island’s virtual meth home, created by the Drug Endangered Child Training Network. A real meth lab is a dangerous



environment, due to the toxic chemicals. This virtual meth lab can be used to train social workers, educators, and law enforcement personnel, to recognize signs of meth production in a home. Going into a real meth home is too dangerous. So this is a great use of the virtual environment for an educational activity that is difficult to conduct in real life.

In addition to our meth lab, we also have an art gallery, currently showing an exhibit of artwork by a UK art student. We have a music performance area, a new parcel for our Medical Center, an admissions and visitor area with information including a promotional UK video, a community center, a football field (which we use for dance parties), a sandbox area where island residents and other visitors can practice building, and a library – built to look like the real William T. Young Library on our campus – which we use for meetings and exhibits. We currently have an exhibit about development of our island in this space, which anyone is invited to come see.

During our very first semester, we had two classes using the island regularly. One was a graduate geography class focused on issues of economics. The other was an undergraduate political science class on American political thought. This semester, a freshman undergraduate seminar is using the island as they learn about real and virtual communities by doing ethnographic research, both on our real campus and within Second Life. The virtual environment gives them access to a lot of different people and groups to interview for their projects.



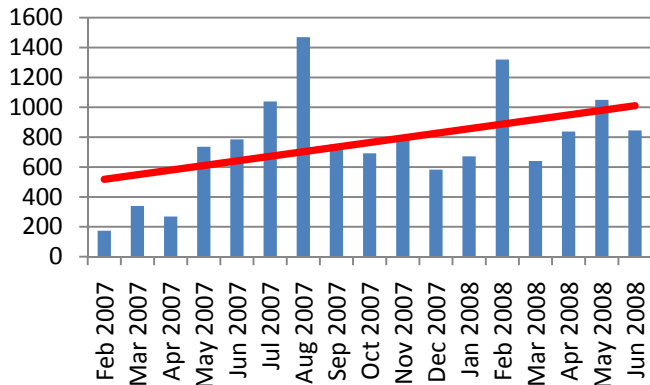
Our first six months on the island was primarily a developmental phase, and now we are ready to focus more on experimenting with how we can use this new technology for education and access to information. We would like to create a speaker series and

provide more support for new Second Life users on our campus. Virtual world applications are still new, but the technology is useful even now as a way to provide a shared experience when looking at an exhibit, for example. As opposed to a 2-d web exhibit, where visitors are not aware of other users, you can explore an exhibit as a group and share reactions. Second Life is also useful right now as a way to extend access to live events or otherwise collaborate with other users all over the world. We hope to use the University of Kentucky's island to make events, speakers, musical performances, and other activities from our campus available to people all over the world.

Librarians in Second Life

What are librarians doing in with this new technology? A lot of the same kinds of things we do in real life, including:

- Reference
- Collection Development
- Continuing Education
- International Collaboration



A lot of the librarian activity in Second Life is affiliated with the Second Life Library 2.0 Project, organized by the Alliance Library consortium in Illinois in 2006. Info Island, which is the main Second Life location for this group, is now a cluster of several islands, many devoted to some particular aspect of librarianship, e.g., Health Info Island (see <http://infoisland.org> for information). Reference is a major activity of the librarians participating in the Second Life Library 2.0 project. This chart shows the number reference interactions on Info Island from February 2007 through June 2008. The red trend line shows an overall increase over the months. Info Island has an average of several hundred reference interactions every month. The majority of the questions have to do with Second Life specifically. Info Island has become known as a good place for new users to get help. But as information resources are brought into this environment, Second Life may become a place to get other kinds of help as well.

“Books” and Information Objects in Second Life



Books and information resources are incorporated in a variety of ways in Second Life. One of the more time-consuming but fun options is a flip book composed of page images. Pages turn as an avatar touches the object. Image uploads cost a few cents per image to create, and can be slow to load. These objects are image-based, so not searchable and users can't copy text from them. But they look cool and they're easy to create. Permissions can be set so the object can be copied, allowing a visitor can take it with them.

Another option for conveying information is to embed a “notecard” in an object, so that when an avatar touches the object the notecard is delivered to them. Notecards are text-based and can also be retained in the user’s inventory.

Another common option for delivering information is to create a slideshow object. This is similar to the flip books, but not as fancy. A flat object changes images as it is touched. This is a common way to do presentations in SL, although some users consider it boring. Why get into an exciting new virtual world and then just do PowerPoint?



One fun and useful type of information resource is called a Hud or a “heads up display”. This is an object that is worn by an avatar and presents some kind of personalized information. For example, Virtual Morocco in Second Life uses an “Info Fez” which is essentially a tour guide of the site. The avatar obtains a fez from a kiosk and wears it while exploring the site. As you walk through the virtual marketplace the fez provides information about the location.

Another common way to bring content into Second Life is to use web links. Objects can be scripted to link out to an external web browser. This is an easy way to bring a lot of available content to a visitor in Second Life, but you leave the immersive environment. So it is not preferred but is useful, especially in the early days of virtual world technology.

Librarians, programmers and others are working to make the book experience in Second Life more functional and immersive. One project under development is a Hud that looks like a book but grabs content dynamically from a database. So it is like the flip book objects, but works with a database back-end. This objects can grab images and text dynamically, making it more flexible and functional. One popular library vendor is currently talking with a group of librarians affiliated with the Alliance library group about how to bring content from one of their databases into Second Life in this kind of way. They are particularly interested in having the content available within the environment, rather than linking out to the web. This project represents the kind of library development currently going on in Second Life.

Special Libraries Association

The Special Libraries Association is one of several professional organizations actively involved in Second Life. SLA established an association-level working group to develop an SLA presence in Second Life, and more importantly, to educate members on virtual worlds. Since the group was formed in spring 2008, they have built an in world presence for members, held a number of social and educational events, and have plans for future training sessions and some interactive exhibits which will celebrate the association’s 100th anniversary in 2009.

Final Thoughts

Second Life is one of many important information tools that librarians should be familiar with. It is very likely that the web as we know it is headed to a 3-D, virtualized platform. While Second Life may not be the ultimate 3-D web platform that is embraced by all, it is essential for librarians to be familiar with virtual worlds like Second Life.