Public Libraries in a Virtual World: A Literature Review

“Libraries are attempting to face a future in which almost every fixed point has disappeared. Users are changing; content is changing. (Law 2009)”

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Worlds

The emergence of social networks such as MySpace and Facebook, often referred to as Web 2.0, has resulted in new ways and channels for people to communicate and collaborate. However, technology has not stopped with two-dimensional networks. The graphical, three-dimensional technology of Virtual Worlds, also known as Web 3D, “create[s] a new stage of collaboration, cooperation, communication with an even higher level of interaction, complexity and value creation.” (Fetscherin and Lattemann 2007, 4) This technology has already begun to impact the way people communicate, interact, and conduct business, just as the introduction of the Internet affected these behaviors. A Virtual World can be defined as:

A persistent online environment that allows users to interact with one another and an artificial world through an agent in that world [often referred to as an avatar]. The online part allows users with Internet access to log on to the Virtual World from any location while the persistent part means the world continues to exist as a single instance whether a specific individual is logged on to the system. (S. Thompson 2009, 219-220)

This means that while you are logged out of a virtual world, no one will see you but activity will go on around you – and you will be in the same place you were when you log back on.

In 2008, the Association of Virtual Worlds listed 250 Virtual Worlds, and the Gartner Group estimated that by 2011, 80 percent of active Internet users will be using Virtual Worlds (Frank 2008, 2). Responses to the idea of Virtual Worlds today are either “negatively dismissive or alluringly positive” (Peters, Terminology 2008, 4); they are seen as a waste of time by some and an exciting breath of fresh air by others.

There are basically two types of Virtual Worlds: role playing worlds and social worlds. Entertainment or gaming is probably the most well known type of Virtual World as it was among the first uses of the technology; there is competition, a winner or loser, and/ or a prize to be won. The largest and most well known is the World of WarCraft. Here players cooperate and compete with each
other on a massive scale. Social worlds do not exist for competition. Social worlds or communities exist more for meeting and sharing information, much like Facebook and MySpace, and to experience new things and places. Examples of social worlds are Active Worlds, Second Life and Smallworlds. People in either gaming or social worlds can be relatives from across the country, or new friends, or total strangers from around the world.

The Wikipedia article on Virtual Worlds describes three applications that can exist within a social world: medical, commercial, and education (Wikipedia). Healthcare agencies offer information on a variety of illnesses, conditions and addictions in the Virtual World of Second Life. This information ranges from providing website links, to assisting with virtual online support groups. The disabled can experience freedom by temporarily leaving their disabilities and doing things, through their avatars, like walking, dancing, fishing, exploring, and other physical activities. Virtual Ability is a hugely popular area within Second Life that provides support, information, and activities for people of all disabilities. There are many examples of commercial us of Virtual Worlds, as companies and organizations have established commercial worlds as a new form of advertising. Apple, for example, has an online store in Second Life, allowing users to browse the latest and innovative products. Virtual Worlds allow companies the opportunity to learn customer reaction to new products. Educational opportunities are thriving in Virtual Worlds. Universities have established locations in Virtual Worlds - either entire campuses or simple classrooms. More and more classes are conducted in the Virtual World environment. For example, students taking a manufacturing class can log into a Virtual World in which they are the inhabitants of a growing village that needs their expertise for the construction of houses, furniture, machines, and other goods. An art class can study the murals in the Sistine Chapel in 3D, or a history class can go to Renaissance Village and feel like they are actually there, walking through the shops and galleries. Education can now be more than books; a Virtual World can provide a more immersive and exploratory experience.

Second Life

Second Life is probably the most well known and largest social Virtual World today. It was created by Linden Labs and opened to the public in 2003 (Frank 2008, 1). While it had an early reputation as being mainly a place to play, that is not the case now. Collaborative work, information sharing, and learning activities have become more popular and taken over as the major activities in Second Life. There are many arguments as to the number of people who have avatars in Second Life, but at any time there are between 35-50,000 avatars online (Frank 2008, 2). “According to a 2007 item
in Second Life Reuters, 54 percent of users were from Europe with only around 31 percent from the United States.” (Frank 2008, 2) The average self-reported age of Second Life users is 33, with 11.5% of users over 45 (Frank 2008, 2). Communication can be voice or chat and can be public (anyone in the surrounding area can see or hear) or private (between two individuals or between individual members of a group).

Second Life has become a popular Virtual World for several reasons. People can join for free and participate without spending any money. While you can spend money to buy land on which to build or to buy clothes, no money is required and there are many “freebie stores” full of clothing and other items. Linden Labs provides the free downloadable software, the virtual space, and the user tools. Everything else is created and owned by the resident users or avatars. The user also owns the intellectual property rights to all items created.

Second Life offers almost any type of activity you can imagine (and probably some you cannot) and provides an enormous development and educational opportunity. You can wander around an interactive sculpture garden or a museum of rockets that have been shot into outer space. You can visit a Van Gogh museum where it is possible to enter a painting and experience the environment of Van Gogh. In this immersive environment, users can have access to real life events that are streamed into Second Life allowing attendance to real life conferences or meetings without traveling. The U. S. Air Force has established a virtual learning center where personnel can learn about the Air Force, fly a virtual P-51 Mustang, and train in a virtual operational environment. Second Life also creates an immersive science research and learning experience; a physicist at the University of Denver created and demonstrated a model of a nuclear reactor in Second Life as a training tool (Pescovitz 2008).

There are those who believe that participation in a Virtual World like Second Life is hiding from reality, while others say it is augmenting reality. But overall, it is a new opportunity to connect to people in a time when real society is increasingly disconnected (Peters, Terminology 2008, 8). A 2007 study titled “User Acceptance of Virtual Worlds” found “that people are using Second Life not to change their identity, but rather to explore and visit new places and meet people.” (Fetscherin and Lattemann 2007, 18) Users of Virtual Worlds often build strong in-world relationships and, therefore, create Virtual World communities including “social conventions, mores, and cultures. In order to serve a VW population well, libraries will need to understand and become a part of these VW cultures.” (Peters, Terminology 2008, 9)
LIBRARIES IN SECOND LIFE

Libraries and librarians in Second Life

It can be asked, why have libraries and librarians begun to be in Second Life. The answer is, that is where users are headed as they become familiar and comfortable with Virtual Worlds! Therefore, libraries should become comfortable with Virtual Worlds, “where potential library users are active and assess how library services might be integrated into these environments. Many individuals now involved in Virtual Worlds may not be traditional library users.” (Bell and Trueman, Introduction 2008, xvi) While most libraries and librarians are asking and struggling with what to do in this new medium, many have decided to be there at the beginning instead of playing catch-up (Bell and Trueman, Introduction 2008, xii). They feel that the knowledge they are gaining now will be of benefit in the future. Many librarians feel so strongly about this that “they are willing to explore Second Life outside of their usual administrative structures,’’ (Frank 2008, 5) spending their own time and possibly money on Second Life projects. Even if librarians are not connected to a library in Second Life, either an independent Second Life Library or a branch of a brick-and-mortar library, many come to meet with their peers from across the country and from around the world to share experiences, learn from each other, and for general camaraderie. It is also a good way to practice reference and service skills (S. Thompson 2009, 223).

Librarians held their first official meeting in Second Life in April, 2006 (Frank 2008, 8). There are many Second Life librarian related groups; as of March 2008, the most active are the Alliance Library Google Groups discussion list with approximately 650 members and the Librarians in Second Life with 800 members (Frank 2008, 8). There is also a very active Second Life Education group of over 4,000 educators and librarians (Frank 2008, 4). The role of the Internet in libraries has expanded traditional services and systems in the real world of bricks-and-mortar and in the digital world of the two-dimensional Web. Soon, libraries will also expand in the three-dimensional Virtual World. Additionally the types or “strains” of librarianship will expand to include: the real world, the online Web world, and the Virtual World, just as our lives as human beings are lived out in these three basic environments (Peters, Terminology 2008, 9-10). Librarians are involved by adding to the culture of Second Life. They are also personally involved in meetings for professional development and are gaining new opportunities for networking.
Library Services in Second Life

Until the emergence of Virtual Worlds, most human interaction with information was two-dimensional. While books are three-dimensional, reading is still a two-dimensional activity. The digital revolution and websites are also two-dimensional. Virtual Worlds, on the other hand, are three-dimensional. “[Y]ou can fly around and through a large molecule, skip through a sculpture garden that conveys both visual and auditory information, experience a tsunami or other natural disaster, or blast off in a rocket ship.” (Peters, Ten Conditions 2008, 17) Libraries in Second Life need to capitalize on this third dimension if they want to attract users. Early collections in Second Life were mainly links to web resources, (Bell, Pope and Peters, The Universal Library 2008) but experience has shown this does not attract many users or invite return visitors. In the Virtual World there should be a “shift away from object-oriented information systems to experience-oriented information systems.... to create an interesting, engaging, and immersive information experience.” (Peters, Ten Conditions 2008, 16) Virtual Worlds are not conducive to traditional library services; they are not the best place to read large quantities of text. While some books are available, they are not for loan: they can be copied and given away, and they can be read or heard in-world (Trueman 2008, 69). Virtual World collections play a more minor role than in real world libraries, while events and exhibits provide a greater value and interest.

The single traditional service that thrives in Second Life is the reference service. At the Alliance Virtual Library, volunteer librarians from all over the world staff the information desk more than 80 hours a week providing reference service (S. Thompson 2008). They assist virtual residents in finding and evaluating online information, but they primarily answer questions about using Second Life itself, including how-tos and places to visit. They provide this service in a variety of languages using Babbler software to translate the text (Bell, Pope and Peters, The Universal Library 2008). Another type of reference service provided by this library is the Roving Reference Librarian. Alliance Library consists of many buildings, and reference librarians, besides sitting at a traditional reference desk, wander the area. Each librarian displays a Reference Librarian tag above the head of their avatar for identification.

Public Libraries in Second Life

All of the traditional types of libraries: public, academic, school and special, exist within Second Life. For the purpose of this paper, only public libraries are being reviewed.

There are virtual branches of public libraries in Second Life that are tied to real life public libraries. The Infolsland Library Directory lists ten public libraries in this category (Infoisland Archipelago
These include: Cleveland Public Library (Ohio), Glenview Public Library (Illinois), Mark & Emily Turner Memorial Library (Maine), Maryland Library System, Monroe County Library System (New York), Olathe Public Library (Kansas), Orange County Library System (Florida), Society Hill SC Public Library, The Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (North Carolina), and the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (Kansas). These Second Life libraries are sponsored by the real life library and built by librarians, mostly on their own time. They each provide a variety of services. They may be a replication of their real life library and provide similar services trying to attract people in the local geographic area, or they may provide additional services and events, reaching out to the larger user base of Second Life.

There are also libraries that are “born virtual.” They do not have a real life library connection. These are built cooperatively by librarians from around the country or around the world. Two well known libraries in this category are the Alliance Virtual Library and the Caledon Library. The Alliance Virtual Library (AVL) is a project of the Alliance Library System (ALS), a regional library system in East Peoria, Illinois with 259 member libraries. The ALS provides a variety of services including continuing education, consulting, grant writing, and new technology initiatives (Bell, Peters and Pope, Enjoying Your First Life?). The Alliance Virtual Library and reference desk serves the general population of Second Life, just as a real life public library serves their local geographic area. As of August 2008, the AVL, now called Info Archipelago, had 43 islands, or plots of land associated with it. The library consists of such areas as the Genealogy Research Center, Library Gallery, Mystery Manor, Performance Center, Science Center, SF/Fantasy Center, and Health Info Island.

Caledon is a popular 19th-century area in Second Life where residents dress in Victorian attire and the shops and homes are required to be 19th-century style. Caledon residents wanted a branch library, so librarians, working together, worked on programs, services, and staffing. Residents were actively involved in the planning and creation of library services in their virtual community (Bell, Peters and Pope, Enjoying Your First Life?). This library was originally a branch of the AVL, but has recently become independent and is also known as The Alexandrian Free Library. The libraries of Caledon consist of six branches: Steelhead, Winterfell, New Toulouse, New Babbage, Amatsu Shima, and West of Ireland. According to JJ Drinkwater (avatar name for the director of the Caledon Library),

The collecting policies of the Caledon Library have two main foci: the 19th century and Caledon's defining literary genres, Steampunk and Alternate History. Within these areas, we collect, first of all, primary source material: 19th-century novels, nonfiction works, and periodicals, along with materials from earlier eras considered important in the 19th century; and of course
defining works in Steampunk and its parent genres. Second, we collect research materials concerning the world of the 19th century and its imagination, and secondary materials useful for studying Caledon's important genres. (Drinkwater 2009)

Use of Second Life Libraries

“There is no serious expectation that patrons will download and use the Second Life software for the exclusive purpose of gaining access to library services,” (S. Thompson 2008, 62) however, Second Life residents are interested in the material, service, and community that in-world libraries provide. They have learned that the library islands are places to gather, where they can meet people and participate in interesting conversations. Programs and events are popular and are attended by a variety of people. “These events are the lifeblood of the [AVL] library even more so than a bricks-and-mortar library.... During 2007, the Second Life Library hosted an average of three to five events per week with audiences of four to five to 60 to 70 avatars. Most programs drew 25-35.” (Bell, Pope and Peters, The Universal Library 2008) The programs are varied, and many of these programs are not possible in real life, including a jousting tourney on Renaissance Island or a speaker that the local librarians could not afford. Most residents do not read while in Second Life, but they will attend book discussions and author visits; they gather for discussion of ideas, to meet new people or old friends, or to experience new things.

Second Life Libraries

In May 2008, the Gardner Research Group found that approximately 90% of businesses in Virtual Worlds fail within 18 months (Peters, Terminology 2008, 7). This is due, they reported, to their lack of understanding of the demographics, attitudes, and expectations of virtual communities. Libraries often have the same issue. “The dictum ‘Know thy community’ may be at least as important, if not more so, in Virtual Worlds than in the real world.” (Peters, Terminology 2008, 8) Businesses and libraries have found you cannot plan and build a presence in Second Life and then just forget about it. Time and resources are needed for ongoing events and changes in offerings. The other issue libraries face is that just re-creating a virtual version of their real life library can be boring in a Virtual World. Successful libraries “do something more innovative, exciting and most importantly, INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY instead of assuming ... they’ll flock to you. ‘If you build it, they will come’ does NOT apply in Virtual Worlds!” (Patel 2009)

There are ways to attract residents to a library in Second Life. The question, “What are your users doing elsewhere that they could be doing in your library,” applies to both real world and Virtual
World libraries. So this gets back to the issue of knowing the community - knowing and understanding the culture of Second Life. For example, residents like to shop and build. Provide “sandboxes” for people to build in (these are non-restricted areas that any avatar can use temporarily and that get cleaned out at the end of the day or week). As part of this, a Second Life library can offer building classes or classes in making clothing. Offer membership to your virtual library. This is a way to connect with residents via email about your library events and happenings, real and virtual. Libraries cannot build great Second Life buildings, beautifully groomed grounds, and provide static displays. Residents in Virtual Worlds want to participate in content creation and interact with other people (Stimpson 2009).

ISSUES

Real Library Organizational Issues

Libraries must take several things into consideration when trying to decide how they will or if they will become involved in Second Life, or in any Virtual World. They need to decide if and how they will support the technology; are they going to provide access for their patrons, are they going to support their staff in developing the necessary skills and understanding of Second Life, or are they going to build an online presence for their own library. These issues are similar to those faced by libraries with the advent of the Internet and the decisions that had to be made about building a library website. Listed below are some of the specific areas that a library will need to consider.

- Providing computing power necessary for running Virtual Worlds for both the real world patrons at their library and for librarians building and maintaining the library’s Virtual World branch.
- Finding a location for a Second Life library where Second Life users are. There may be 50,000+ users logged on, but they are spread out across a large area. Therefore, population density and traffic patterns must be taken into consideration (Frank 2008, 18). The virtual library could also be built in a residential area instead of alongside all of the other libraries, involving the community in the design and services (Peters, Issues 2008, 18).
- Funding for the project - the potential of serving patrons from around the world paid for by local funds. This is an area where innovation will help. Ideas include renting out space and services of the Second Life library to in-world organizations and individuals. Create a building on the property, in back of the library for residents to live – it would be fun to live at the library! (Peters, Issues 2008, 18)
- Timing. Some people argue that Virtual Worlds, Second Life included, are still new and still tentative for real development, while others say that libraries should develop a presence in Virtual Worlds now versus later. They point to the “wait-and-see attitude arguably adopted by libraries and librarianship toward the early rapid development of information systems and services on the Web. Stated bluntly, if librarians had been more aggressive in developing library services on the Web, would Google have quickly become one of the largest companies in the
world ... by developing cognate systems and services?” (Peters, Issues 2008, 19) Second Life is a hot technology, but today it is far from being mainstream.

- Portability to another world. If the world of Second Life disappears, there currently is no technological method to move what has been developed in Second Life to another Virtual World, even though content creators retain intellectual property rights (Sanchez, Facing Realities 2009, 8). Currently, IBM and others are exploring open standards and the capability of moving avatars and their content between worlds (de Freitas 2008, 31).

- Books or no books? “In a twenty-first century virtual library do we want books? What format do books and reading take in Second Life?” (Bell, Peters and Pope, Enjoying Your First Life?)

- Organizational baggage: assumptions, structures, and constraints. These issues may slow or misdirect the efforts of forward-thinking libraries and librarians (Peters, Introduction 2008, 5).

- Individual library vs. centralized library. “Born-virtual library-related initiatives may come to run the VW roost.” (Peters, Introduction 2008, 6) This provides the ability for collaboration and information resource sharing among librarians.

- Additional technical issues. Second Life does nothing to “assist with bridging the digital divide, and in fact [it] widen[s] it... Only patrons operating quite current computers can access SL at all.” (S. Thompson 2008, 66)

Issues for Real Life Librarians

Librarians must also consider how they will or will not become involved in Second Life. Nearly all of the librarians in Second Life are volunteers, and most of the librarians are working independent of their real life library. They may or may not have the backing of their individual library, but even if they do, the time they spend in Second Life is normally during non-Library working hours. Becoming involved in Second Life and understanding its value takes a real commitment of time. Listed below are some of the issues that must be considered in making this investment.

- The social challenges of “managing communities, plugging into social networks, and becoming accustomed to the cultures within a Virtual World. “ (Sanchez, Conclusion 2008, 35)

- Consideration for the status of librarians in a future where virtual librarianship may be dominated by freelance professionals rather than by libraries and related organizations (Peters, Introduction 2008, 6).

- Staffing a Second Life library. Evenings and Sundays are the busiest times in Second Life and the best time to meet people (Bell, Peters and Pope, Enjoying Your First Life?). Therefore, if a library wants to interact with Second Life residents, this must be done on off-hours from real life librarians.

- A huge issue most librarians in Second Life deal with is whether they will be allowed to work in Second Life, especially on their real life library branch, during normal work hours. This is a management issue and a peer issue; trying to get management and peers to see Second Life as a value, not a game.
• The most successful library initiatives in Second Life have been achieved primarily by library professional working and collaborating in a freelance or pro bono fashion, not necessarily under or with a real life organization (Peters, Introduction 2008, 5).

• While there may be limited benefits to libraries and library users to get into Second Life at this time, there may be benefits to librarians. Dealing with Virtual Worlds and understanding the content that users may be looking for is a learning experience. This is similar to when librarians first authored web pages; learning the how and then learning the content needs. This new interface, which may change in the future as technology evolves, will have similar elements of a 3D interface and a social, immersive environment (Greenhill 2007).

• Collaboration elements of Second Life help break down the barriers of professional isolation. Librarians meet with and share experiences with librarians from across the country and around the world to “gain experiential knowledge on how to deliver library services in these virtual environments.” (Peters, Librar-Things 2008, 9)

CONCLUSION

Virtual Worlds provide a new way of collaboration, cooperation, and communication. With its graphical, three-dimensional design, there is a higher level of interaction, complexity, and potential value over other social networks such as the two-dimensional networks of Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. Virtual Worlds impact the way people communicate, interact, and share information. At first the media reported high expectations and exuberance about the future of Second Life, which has yet to materialized. Most researchers, however, believe that in the near future, Virtual Worlds like Second Life will be a commonly used technology as the culture of the environment is better understood and the understanding of its value in the medical, business and educational areas are better known and utilized.

However, despite initial expectations not being met, libraries and businesses should continually look at how Virtual Worlds will fit into their future (Patel 2009). “As a profession, librarianship needs to work through its tendency toward denial ... and begin exploring how librarianship can survive and thrive in Virtual Worlds.” (Peters, Introduction 2008, 5) Librarians, especially, should become familiar with the technology and what it can provide for them personally and professionally, even if they do not have the backing of their own real life library. There is a lot to be gained from the collaborative experience of working, meeting, and talking to librarians across the country and around the world. Libraries should decide how they will become involved and what that timing should be. While libraries may decide they do not want to jump full-force into building a Second Life branch, they should be aware of Virtual
Worlds and Second Life, and support their librarians who wish to become involved and knowledgeable with this technology.

*If there is one overarching principle that defines what the new Web is, it’s that we are building this thing together – one blog post, podcast, and mashup after another. The Web is no longer about idly surfing and passively reading, listening, or watching. It’s about peering: sharing, socializing, collaborating, and, most of all, creating within loosely connected communities. (Tapscott and Williams 2007, 45)*
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