

Librarian Avatars in Second Life:

A Review of the literature

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This article is offering information about the libraries that have challenged building virtual libraries and conducting library activities in Second Life virtual world either in public or academic. It's an effort to demonstrate benefits of collaboration, creativity, learning and networking among librarians and their patrons by participating in a virtual world like Second Life.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of issues related to library services in Second Life which is becoming popular as an online role-playing game, although it's not merely a game. Following questions guided the literature review:

1. What value do libraries bring from the real life to the Second Life virtual environment?
2. What opportunities Second Life provide for libraries and their patrons in terms of information retrieval (or any other service librarians should provide)?

In an introductory article to Second Life, Godfrey and Dinberg (2007) describe it as a hybrid, social online world, virtual 3D environment which begun by Linden Lab in 2003, growing rapidly in a year with current over 7 million residents. Second life residents can find museums, concerts, learning environments, or even 19th century world in this virtual environment. As living in the real life, Second Life residents do real work like socializing, attending live music events and lectures, building virtual objects, and playing in a virtual space.

Librarians have interaction with the library users to provide reference services like answering their questions, using the resources available through the library, using computer applications and tools in technology, conducting educational courses, classes on information literacy, book discussions and so on.

This literature review is providing evidence on how librarians either in academic or public have challenged to reach out Second Life residents to provide them same kind of service that they would do in real life situation.

The first literature examination is on the collaboration of different librarians from all over the world, and how they inspired to initiate the Alliance Second Life Library project.

Roots of the ALS

In December 2005 Lori Bell the director of innovation at the Alliance Library System, a regional multiple library system located in East Peoria, Ill and Tom Peters the founder of TAP information Services in Blue Springs. Mo. attended the Gaming, Learning, and Libraries symposium, which was held by Chicago's Metropolitan Library System, where they learned about the virtual worlds such as Second Life, Active Worlds, and there.com. Bell, et al (2007).

They also saw the Appalachian State University in NC and Eastern University in PA who had set up institution-specific libraries in Active Worlds. Here, they were inspired to set up a collaborative library in which the work and coverage could be share, building on the model of many statewide virtual reference services. (Bell, et al.,2007, p.13). She is saying: "Librarians always have been looking for opportunities to get their libraries active in gaming and virtual worlds, so that they could make collections and

services available where the users are, because of the remarkable growth of the SL platform and its educational opportunities, the establishment of a library presence seemed important.” (Bell, et al.,2007, p.12).

ALS Services on Second Life

One year later in 2006, the ALS chose SL for their first experience into virtual worlds because of the safety; variety of environment; as well as ease of use; institutional support and acceptance by a diverse population. The librarians began creating books, links to Web resources in many subject areas, book discussions, mystery Manor, Goth castle with posters, Talis SciFi, Fantasy Gallery (Bell, et al. 2007, p.13). The ALS librarians obtained an eight floors building so that each floor is dedicated to special theme such as government documents, humanities, business and others with Web resources, books and the environment based around the theme. In this virtual library, the ALS librarians were able to support information needs of the SL residents such as providing reference services, training program, outreach to virtual educational communities, important consumer report, and one-on-one information support simply by greeting and answering their questions or offering tours and orientations (P.14).

More Library Services in Second Life

Virtual Bibliographic Instruction

In 1998 an information service librarian named Mark Puterbaugh at Pennsylvania’s East University, created a 3-D virtual library on the Web with Bibliographic Instruction (Hawkins and Brynko, 2006). His VBI was a reason for students to keep coming back to visit the virtual library for more interaction such as looking at reference index, finding the answers to their reference question simply by type in their requests.

Library Music in Second Life

Mandi Dorrel, an Eastern University student was able to research music by actually walking into an Open House and playing CDs (Hawkins and Brynko, 2006, p.51).

Interaction with Librarian Avatars

In some ways the Second Life Library2.0 project exemplifies Library 2.0 concepts because of providing services at the point of need; being free from most barriers; its' participatory and flexible. Librarians are able to reach out to people in their real lives from their virtual lives and provide them real library services, in synchronous and asynchronous communication using the existing tools through the Second Life (Swanson, 2007, p. 81).

Walking through the bookshelves in Second Life Libraries

For many who never walk in a physical library but access information online, 3-D technology is very well suited to libraries. 3-D virtual library enables the user to move through the building by using the PC's arrow up and down rather than just clicking on a hyperlink, walking through the bookshelves (which will open the OPAC or a subject directory in a separate window if they click on a book), interact with an avatar librarian at the reference desk or clicking on a photo of a human librarian and find the answer to their question by using a chat feature (Hawkins and Brynko, 2006, p.51).

Using Database Directory in Second Life Libraries

Database directory can be displayed on a PC monitor where the users are able to connect to an in-house database or an entry screen where they can enter a password. They are also able to access electronic journals and books same way or connect to the branch library by using a navigation link. All of the above experiences looks so realistic

when the users are able to interact with other people see the blue sky or flying birds in the background or sitting on chairs (Hawkins and Brynko, 2006, p.51).

Medical library in Second Life

Another project which Puterbaugh is working on, is a virtual hospital for nursing students, where they can stand at a patient's bedside and hear cardiac arrhythmia by clicking on the virtual heart monitor (Hawkins and Brynko, 2006, p.51).

Second Life Libraries as a development

In the answer to the question if Second Life Libraries are much of a development, Stephen Abram vice president and innovator of SirsiDynix is saying "it's about the experience. It's about learning by doing." He says: "we have not hit a boundary that says you can't do anything in Second Life that you can do in a real physical/virtual library (Abram, 2007). He believes that the purpose of the Second Life Library 2.0 is to provide real library services to its residents and collaborate with other educators (Abram, 2007 p.36).

Esther Grassian librarian at UCLA College library and Rhonda B. Trueman librarian at Johnson and Wales University in Charlotte, North Carolina have discussed Second Life and libraries related issues from a critical point of view (Grassian & Trueman, 2007). In question to why should we care about being a player in a nonexistent world when we have enough challenges in the existent world? Grassian replies that Second Life is the next virtual step beyond the Web and it is offering community and connectedness in a way that its participants are "players" in the sense of being participants, observing, creating, objects, and sharing their knowledge and experience, their very human personalities and efforts to invent and reinvent this virtual world (Grassian & Trueman,

2007, p.84). Trueman believes where people are able to meet, collaborate and communicate, there is a built-in existence and we as librarian want to be where our users are, and more importantly, we want to be where we can make library users out of non-users.(Grassian & Trueman, 2007, p.85).

Below is a snapshot on Info Island (57,199, 35) a virtual library in SL with the poster on libraries conference.



Challenges in Second Life Libraries

Bell et al.(2007) discusses a few challenges that librarians have to face when they are thinking of developing projects in Second Life. There is still a lot to experience when a user is accessing information by browsing a 3-D library in Second Life. For example entering SL could be like going to a foreign country without knowing the language if the person has no gaming background, or creating an object or clothing for the avatar involves high learning. It requires spending lots of time. (Bell et al. 2007, p.14).

As far as required equipment, participants in SL need a fairly new computer and broadband access. These requirements limit the ability for many librarians and patrons to get involved.

There are other challenges being discussed like the “learning curve” which means duration of learning or experience and the resulting, time to develop quality material, the social issues like mature content or encountering undesirable behavior, privacy and security issues, copyright and intellectual property (<https://flc-vw.wikispaces.com/White+paper>).

Second Life is down to be updated every Wednesday at least for 5 hours. There are some unplanned downtimes because of the problems created in the system by hackers which can be frustrating for educators who have an activity or class planned (Bell et al. 2007, p.15).

Conclusion

In the answer to the first question of what value do libraries bring from the real life to the Second Life virtual environment, we found that the libraries are able to provide many services from A-Z by going to virtual areas where the users are.

For the second question of what opportunities Second Life provide for libraries and their patrons in terms of information retrieval (or any other service librarians should provide), we learned that the librarians are able to provide information through chat line feature of Second Life, walking the user through for accessing information on available databases provided in Second Life, or how to built objects and use other SL features.

Second Life has begun to impact library services. In this day and age that learners and students are not bound by time and place, when they wish to learn 24x7 at their own pace and from any place in the world, Second Life can be a challenge in the e-learning environment enabling us to imbed many of the traditional library services and resources

into virtual learning environment, so that the users have easy access to library information and resources within their personal learning space.

We have to find methods of engaging all individuals and establish principles that will guide the SL strategies. A list of what can be made for the future policies, practices and systems should be provided. There are already collaboration among some libraries but the motion of more partnership between library and learning and teaching system should be encouraged.

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