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Second Life complements the Internet for reference librarians

by Florence Tang

Librarians meet in Second Life to discuss collaborative reference services.

Six librarians in front of a large map type quickly — using a language that looks like Swedish although the map is in English. It is soon apparent that these visitors are not familiar with the area and are trying to find their way.

“You’re very petite!” I once commented, and five others in the room turned around to look at a short woman. One spectator admitted that she felt rude.

These two scenarios could happen only when people are interacting face to face — except that *none* of these people may have even been physically located in the same room. All were interacting via Second Life. This article is an introduction to Second Life culture from the perspective of a real life and avatar reference librarian. It also gives reasons why librarians and their patrons may or may not want to utilize Second Life.

What is Second Life?

Like other interactive virtual environments (IVEs), Second Life complements rather than is a substitute for the World Wide Web. Second Life may look like an online video game, yet it has no points, no competition, and no goals other than those that the individual users decide. Second Life equips users with a range of tools, yet few restrictions. Second Life “in-world” residents have blogs, group and individual profiles, and a “friends” list that is like any other Web 2.0 tool. Second Life residents can instant message, group chat, watch videos, hold video and/or voice conferences, listen to recordings and view RSS feeds and web pages. As in real life, the slideshow presentation is a lecture mainstay. Most features are available through a single Second Life software package.

By creating a Second Life account, the user creates an avatar, or pixilated representation of the user. Most Second Life avatars appear human, but some appear as animals, robots or mythic creatures. Avatars may nod or shake their heads, laugh, shrug their shoulders, raise their hands, hug or perform other gestures. Avatars are located in a shared, virtual space regardless of the real-life, physical location of their “typists.” Avatars’ unique usernames are displayed in boxes above their heads. It is easy to reconnect with other Second Life residents through Second Life instant messages, which may be saved and forwarded to the user’s real life email address if the resident is not currently logged into Second Life.

Second Life residents have intellectual property rights to their creations. Intellectual property rights holders may sell their creations, often in unmanned kiosks or stores. No money is required to create an avatar in Second Life, but many users purchase virtual clothing, accessories, property, and even tinted skin for their avatars.

There are two Second Life universes: the teen grid, restricted to real-life youth under 18 years of age and their well-screened educators, and the adult grid restricted to adults whose real life age is 18 and older. Within the adult grid, locations are labeled as PG or Mature, analogous to PG and R movie ratings.

My experience with Second Life libraries has centered on the Alliance Virtual Library. Based in East Peoria, Illinois, the real life Alliance Library System created its Second Life Library in 2006, offering in-world reference services to Second Life’s global public. The Alliance Virtual Library has characteristics similar to those of real life libraries. Both can be considered social spaces. Six-thousand avatars per day visit the Alliance Information Achipelago on Second Life.¹

Both real world and Second Life libraries have reference service, periodicals, changing displays, exhibits, programs, comfortable seating, and even plants. Both have staffs and budgets supplemented with real-life grants and staffs, and both participate in professional development training. The volunteer staff of the Alliance Virtual Library includes a director, head of collections, head of reference and volunteer coordinator. Reference desk volunteers must have months of in-world experience, attend training sessions and shadow a more experienced volunteer. Department heads and others give reports during staff meetings. Tensions have arisen between staff members with MLS degrees and those without.

Why Use Second Life?

There are 4000 to 50,000 avatars present on Second Life at any given time.² It is estimated that by 2011, 80% of Internet users will be using IVEs³. Unlike the World Wide Web, Second Life does not have a digital divide based on gender, age or even technical ability. The average Second Life user is 35 years old and 50% of all users are women.⁴ Younger users may have a shorter learning curve when entering Second Life due to previous experience navigating avatars in video games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) like World of Warcraft, which boasts over 11.5 million subscribers worldwide.⁵

I have found synchronous interaction with other people the most valuable part of being on Second Life. In contrast to viewing a web page, entering the virtual world as an avatar makes the user a participant. Avatars can create a more controlled and sometimes more telling first impression than people in real life. I once told a patron wearing camouflage pants and a bandanna that his oversized machine gun violated the library's no weapons policy. Miniature avatars are sometimes cooed at as one would coo to a baby or puppy in real life.

In videoconferencing, if one location has twelve people and the other five, the faces of the five individuals will appear larger on screen than the twelve faces sharing a screen. Identical images projected to a SmartBoard may be a shared object, but otherwise the two groups do not share a common space.⁶ Penn State researchers have found that Second Life teams cooperating to solve mathematical problems gave more accurate answers than their real life counterparts.⁷

In Second Life, as in real life, it is easier to understand other avatars standing closer to you. Their chat text appears brighter than the text of those standing farther away. The chat texts of avatars located 20 or more virtual meters away are not visible.

Social norms in Second Life replicate those of real life, although there are some differences. Women are more likely to face each other when talking with less space between them than are men, who are more likely to stand at an angle from each other, especially in confined spaces.⁸ Different arrangements for placing speakers in relation to a group or audience have the same effect in Second Life gatherings as it in real life. However, in Second Life there are circles of chairs that always leave one welcoming empty chair. As soon as that chair is filled, a new chair appears. Compared to other forms of online communicators, Second Life users are less likely to "flame" or insult because they see a "person" in front of them. Shy people become more gregarious in Second Life. After using Second Life, many people report becoming friendlier in approaching real-life strangers. The norm in Second Life culture is that everyone greets each other. Perceived anonymity makes people more willing to ask questions. Maps within the Second Life browser show avatars' locations. It is not uncommon to visit a private home in Second Life and have a curious stranger peek in to see what other avatars are doing.

With the necessary computer connectivity, hardware and software, Second Life is virtually accessible to anyone regardless of age or gender. Caretakers, the homebound and people with disabilities are among those who benefit most from Second Life. There are hundreds of health-related support groups in Second Life for people who may not be mobile or open enough in real life to seek others who share their illnesses.

Information and the Library in Second Life

Volunteers cover the AVL reference desk 80 hours per week. Most patrons in a real-life library live nearby. At the Alliance Virtual Library, patrons may be miles away and have never ventured outside of their country.

Free, in-world software translates chat text immediately into one of twenty-two languages. I have seen a librarian who spoke no German answer the reference question of a German who spoke no English. The German was not even aware that a translator was being used.

Events that take place at a specific, advertised time in Second Life Time (SLT or real-life Pacific Time) are the library offerings of most interest to me as a Second Life patron. I have attended lectures, book talks, and memorial services in Second Life, and there are no travel costs. As in face-to-face communication, asking questions after a session is a common phenomenon in Second Life. At one lecture, the guest speaker disappeared after giving his presentation and everyone in the virtual auditorium found it odd.

The Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois offers courses in "Virtual World Librarianship". Valuable knowledge can be gleaned by attending a genealogy workshop at the virtual Genealogy Research Center given by a genealogist with decades of real-life experience, and by meeting the friendly Geographic Information Systems Librarian during his real-life and Second Life office hours at the GIS gazebo. A real-life medical librarian gives MEDLINE and consumer health information training sessions from HealthInfo Island in Second Life.

Surprising to many new, professional users of Second Life is the popularity of dancing and music events. These are offered just as refreshments are used in real life to draw attendees. The Cleveland Public Library's grand opening party of its Second Life library included a costume contest on the floor of a giant chessboard for avatars to dress as their favorite chess pieces. The event highlighted the real-life Cleveland Public Library's extensive collection of chess-game related materials.

Second Life provides a collaborative learning experience even when there is no scheduled event. My avatar is a member of ACRL in Second Life, Library Reference Group, and the Library Academic Avatars group. Multiple libraries that are not geographically close in real life can collaborate in Second Life. Two universities presented

their students' artwork at a joint exhibit. The librarian on reference duty can send an instant message for advice to all reference staff currently logged in, thus appearing more knowledgeable to patrons than s/he really is! Although no events were scheduled at Northern Illinois University's Second Life campus on the weekend of the infamous shootings in 2008, I could teleport to the campus, leave flowers, and share my feelings with other concerned American educators. I have sought assistance at an island dedicated to the promotion of Open Source software by asking the avatars milling about the Linux operating system Ubuntu.

Fans of historical culture inhabit Renaissance Island or Caledon, where avatars dress in period clothing and behave with the mannerisms of the 17th or 19th centuries respectively. Renaissance Island has its own Globe Theater. In Renaissance Island, I met a person who typed using Shakespearean English spelling. Entering an area representing the 1880s era, I was immediately aware of how inappropriate my clothing looked and entered clothing stores to see what would be more appropriate for the time period. Avatars role play as Henry VIII, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver and other historical figures.

While some of Second Life's museums and galleries are replicas of their real life counterparts, others do not or



The universal library in a virtual universe

could not exist in real life. For instance, it is difficult to gain a sense of how far the Sistine Chapel's ceiling is from the floor without a three-dimensional reproduction like that on Vassar College's Second Life campus. Unlike real life tourists, avatars may fly closer to the ceiling for a better view! The Old Masters Picture Gallery gives art lovers a greater sense of being at the real life gallery in Dresden, Germany, than a glossy folio book can. Virtual patrons hear the sounds of the running fountains when approaching the domed building. Inside, visitors can see the physical relationship pieces have with each other. The virtual visitor can appreciate the curator's work in grouping pieces together. In Virtual Starry Night, a Van Gogh gallery, self-portraits are hung in one hall, flowers in another, etc. Works that are located on different continents or lost or destroyed in real life may be hung in a single gallery in Second Life. The gallery also contains "life-sized" three-dimensional recreations of Van Gogh's works through which avatars can navigate. The International Spaceflight Museum could not exist in real life, even if it only contained life-sized, non-lethal reproductions, due to the enormous size of the pieces. Bradley University markets its real life campus through exhibits in the virtual 19th century home of Lydia Bradley, the university's founder. Assigning students to curate their own virtual galleries could be a useful learning tool.

Interactive displays in the sciences include "The Gene Pool" created by a professor from Texas Wesleyan University⁹, "Second Life Heart Murmur Sim" created by an instructor from San Jose State University, and many examples of molecular models that can be found on Drexel University's Second Life space, among many others¹⁰.

The health sciences, mystery, science fiction and Victorian libraries look architecturally appropriate in ways real libraries could not due to the limitations of gravity, weather, space, cultural appropriateness or financial restrictions.

Caveats to Using Second Life

Since most questions at the Alliance Virtual Library's reference desk are about how to navigate Second Life, some users may question whether encouraging frustrated newbies to interact within a for-profit company's product should be the purview of unpaid volunteers. "Linden Labs should pay us!" exclaimed one volunteer while teaching avatar navigation. Linden Labs opened Second Life to the public in 2003 but continues to own the servers that host all of Second Life's content. Before making a significant financial investment in Linden dollars or Second Life, consider that when the servers are down, or if Linden Labs were to close its business, you would be unable to

access the virtual objects, land, money and other virtual possessions.

The Second Life currency is the Linden Dollar (L\$). As of this writing, one US Dollar is valued as L\$260¹¹. Linden Labs charges \$.30 per transaction for exchanging US dollars to Linden dollars and 3.5% for exchanging Linden dollars to US dollars. Linden Dollars are required for buying or renting property in Second Life. Importing images to Second Life requires a small fee of L\$10 per image. A keyword search for places in Second Life's internal search engine will only produce results for establishments that have paid a L\$30-per-week charge.¹²

Like the real world, the virtual world is not immune to financial difficulties. Recent spikes in rental costs caused many virtual landowners to eliminate content that librarians had volunteered to develop.

Second Life's content is created by its residents, who may not consider how their creations will affect others who do not share the same technological capacities. Second Life's internal search engine lacks Google's sophisticated search algorithm, so I often toggle between the virtual world and a web browser to use the familiar, web search engine with keywords like "slurl" to search for Second Life content.

A computer must have at least a high speed internet connection and a certain level of hardware to run Second Life effectively. Installing the software on all public computers would make the entire network slower although Second Life's mentor program, help area, and the Alliance Virtual Library's reference desk are available to those who are curious but lack computer skills. Due to copyright and licenses, access to resources is a problem when assisting Second Life patrons located anywhere in the world.

I have asked American patrons of the Alliance Virtual Library if their school or public library had certain popular databases. If they did not know how to access those databases, I referred them to their real world library. Although librarians may not want to assist patrons from outside their tax-base or school, it is educational for local library patrons to meet culturally different peoples who may not even share the experience of having been to the United States.

Younger users, who are accustomed to sophisticated interactions using ASCII text, may find the visual aids of Second Life's virtual people and physical objects unnecessary. Libraries using Second Life to attract younger users may not achieve that result. It is rather the

older users — who require a visual reference point mimicking real life — who use Second Life the most.

Second Life's "griefers," the Alliance Virtual Library's problem patrons, may seek to intentionally distress other avatars. One Portuguese-speaking patron insisted that he did not know how to speak English or wear clothing until he was threatened with banishment from the library. A more recent griever aggressively solicited all female patrons and insulted everyone else. The reference librarian on duty told him to stop the behavior, but he responded with insults. Next the librarian contacted the Alliance Virtual Library's director, who observed the behavior and asked the griever to be respectful of others. As he ignored the director's request as well, she immediately added him to a list of banned avatars and he vanished.

One criticism of Second Life is that the virtual public places are mostly empty. This comment was once made to me about Second Life's houses of worship. I responded that this was true for many real life churches as well when it was not a Sunday. If one were to compare IVEs to the WWW, most Web pages do not have any viewers most of the time.

The Alliance Virtual Library used to have a boxy "Carnegie Library" building in Second Life. It still has a reference desk. As with other Second Life buildings modeled too closely after real life, this building required avatars to maneuver through its narrow doorways. Camera angles were blocked by walls. The AVL's buildings now have wide entrances and are often intentionally missing walls or roofs for increased avatar accessibility. The AVL has relinquished the familiar Carnegie Library appearance in favor of greater avatar navigability.

There is less hierarchy among participants than in face-to-face interaction but more than in other Web 2.0 tools. This is due to visually perceived differences in age, size, gender and species. One can also determine by the speed of an avatar's movement if the typist has a fast computer and strong internet bandwidth.

Although one would like to think that Second Life bridges global barriers of distance and language, its users are still primarily from the Western Hemisphere. Other IVEs are more popular with the language populations they were designed for. Even among Second Life English speakers, Europeans and Americans will always disagree about the best time to hold meetings and events.

Book, film and play discussions in Second Life are popular if the reading or watching of the works is carried out in

the real world. Reading long, continuous passages of text in the three-dimensional virtual world is more cumbersome than reading from a webpage. A Web page with links to websites may be more accessible for the user than a Second Life sign with links to websites, because the user only opens one web browser instead of opening both the Second Life browser and an Internet browser. Although the Second Life software includes a web browser, it lacks the functionality of a Mozilla Firefox or Internet Explorer.

A clever builder on HealthInfo Island successfully used Second Life's three-dimensional properties as a finding aid by creating a large, virtual doll. A sign instructs users to click on parts of the doll to link to disability resources information. Clicking on the doll's ears links the user to resources for the hearing impaired. Clicking on a leg produces links to resources for those with mobility disabilities. This pictorial method is perhaps nanoseconds more intuitive than reading the words "Dictionary" or "Resources for the hearing impaired," but is more difficult to create.

Second Life chatting via rapid typing can also be an obstacle for some. The user's chat text is not visible to others until the user presses the enter key. Typing a conversation is slower than speaking face to face. Multiple avatars in the same room may display their chat text on the screen at the same second. The lag in reading and typing time eventually causes multiple conversations to be held simultaneously, and questions to be repeated. The temptation for users is to shorten their responses to reduce this time lag, but brief, abrupt responses may increase miscommunication and reduce critical thinking.

Buildings, landscapes and even avatars can change quickly. A library building was rotated to make it more accessible. A virtual library was cut and pasted into a new location, leaving patrons linking to old "landmarks" (bookmarks to virtual locations) suddenly lost in an empty desert or new store. A blond man wearing a kilt sometimes appears as a quadruped wolf or bear, but most residents keep a consistent shape and change only their hair and clothing frequently. A real-life individual may identify so closely with the avatar that the person forgets that she or he is really older and less svelte than he or she looks in Second Life!

Will Second Life Survive?

According to the Association of Virtual Worlds, there are over 250 interactive virtual environments. Although Second Life may disappear in the future, IVEs as a group will continue to live. Second Life competitors include Active Worlds, There.com and HiPiHi. OpenSim is

particularly promising because it allows Second Life users to enter virtual locations housed not by Linden Lab servers, but by anyone with the real life technological capacity to host them.

Institutions from the United States Army to China's Palace Museum are either planning or now using IVEs to educate soldiers and potential tourists. In the Palace Museum's IVE, avatars virtually live in the Forbidden City during the Qing Dynasty. As IVEs are the inevitable progression of Internet technology, libraries will likely continue to use the application to effectively educate and communicate with their patrons. ►►

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