

The Future of the Library – Does it Lie in Virtual Worlds?

Introduction

Where will the library be five years now? What will it look like, and what will be the challenges that it faces? These are complex questions that deserve complex answers – too complex, perhaps, to be answered in this paper. However, there are some who might say that the future of libraries is already here – in virtual worlds.

This paper will give a brief overview of the future challenges and opportunities open to libraries, entirely from the view of the virtual world library¹. It will discuss their pros and cons, the peculiarities unique to them, and the users they are trying to reach. Furthermore, it will investigate whether they are sustainable entities; first as a futuristic kind of library ‘outreach program’, and second as a substitute for ‘real life’ libraries themselves.

Libraries in the Virtual World

What are virtual worlds?

Most people today are now familiar with online videogames such as the popular *World of Warcraft*, which certainly have elements of the virtual world, but are not exactly cognate with one. The difference is that virtual worlds (or Multi-User Virtual Environments – MUVE) have no rewards, no goals, and no designated objective. Their purpose is essentially to mimic real-world environments, giving users (or ‘residents’ as they are known in-world) a place to explore, interact, build and shop. There are several virtual worlds in existence today – for example, *Active Worlds*, *There* and *OpenSim*. By far the most popular of these worlds is *Second Life* (SL), which was opened to the public in 2003 by Linden Labs (Hudson, 2011). Since then, *Second Life* has gained about 54,000 concurrent users (Nino, 2010); it

¹ Not to be confused with virtual libraries, which, while also set in a digital environment, refers to ‘a user-accessible network of computer-based resources’ – also known as a digital or electronic library (Feather and Sturges, 2003, p. 651).

maintains in its own currency, Linden Dollars; sells its own virtual land and commodities; and has even spawned its own entrepreneur. Its residents are called avatars, and can take on any form that a user chooses (from human, animal, mineral, vegetable, or a hybrid of all these).

Perhaps surprisingly, libraries have existed in *Second Life* for quite some time. The Second Life Library was opened in 2005 by an avatar named Jade Lily, but closed shortly thereafter (Hudson, 2011). It was in 2006 that a concerted effort was made to open the Second Life Library 2.0 (SLL2), by the Alliance Library System and Online Programming for all Libraries (OPAL). This grew to include a number of information services based on a donor-granted archipelago named Info Island, which was staffed by volunteer librarians from all over the world (Hedreen et al, 2008). Hedreen et al. outlines the SLL2 mission as follows (pp. 169-170): -

- To explore the issues of providing library services in a virtual world
- To evaluate services currently offered by real-world libraries, in the light of features offered in virtual reality environments and the information needs of VR residents
- To examine how libraries will remain relevant when more business and education activities take place virtually
- To promote the real library and online library services to residents of *Second Life*
- To learn what types of library services are desired in virtual space

Since its inception, SLL2 has grown to include a number of library and information services, including a genealogy research centre, mystery novel and science fiction branches, a science centre, government resources, and a steampunk-themed library branch based in the SL town of Caledon (Hudson, 2011). As can be seen, SLL2 has done much to reach the denizens of *Second Life* in a wide variety of ways.

Public Libraries in *Second Life*

Many 'real life' public libraries have chosen to have a virtual world presence in *Second Life*. Zamarripa (2010) cites several such American libraries, including the Cleveland Public Library (Ohio), the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenberg County (North Carolina), and the Glenview Public Library (Illinois), to name but a few. These libraries are sponsored and constructed by their real world

counterpart, who are largely responsible for their functioning. But there are also born-virtual libraries, which have no real world counterpart, and which are 'built cooperatively by librarians from around the country or around the world' (Zamarripa, p. 6). An example of this is the Alliance Virtual Library (AVL), a project of the Alliance Library System, which houses reference desks throughout Info Island. The aim of AVL is to serve the *Second Life* populace as any bricks-and-mortar library would serve its own resident population. Their services not only include access to 'real world' resources, but also to in-world ones – many users are newcomers asking about how the world works, and where they can go (Erdman, 2007). As such, AVL is serving its (virtual) resident population, as well as those in 'meatspace', or the real world.

Academic Libraries in *Second Life*

One of the unique features of libraries in *Second Life* is that they can serve users that are unable to access libraries in the real world, yet they can serve them in a real world-type environment. This is evidenced by the sheer amount of academic libraries that have created SL-based counterparts in order to reach, for example, distance learners.

The rather aptly named Sims Memorial Library of the Southeastern Louisiana University (Southeastern) is one such example. Southeastern is primarily a commuter campus, and the second largest provider of distance learning in Louisiana (Ralph and Stahr, 2010). Ralph and Stahr also note the difficulties in reaching students who do not visit the library, and view SL as a means to engaging a certain type of user – digital natives – as well as the distance learner. Staffed by librarian-avatars, library resources included access to the library's homepage, online databases, catalogue, and so on. These were opened up via floating 'labels' into a regular web browser. Librarian-avatars also offered orientations and bibliographic instruction – web casts were 'posted to the podium in the SL library so students could attend at their discretion' (Ralph and Stahr, p. 916).

Interactive and immersive events are some of the most popular services on offer in SL (Stimpson, 2009), and this is reflected in the exhibits academic libraries have made use of. Bell, Lindbloom, Peters and Pope (2008) highlight the SLL2's Marie Antoinette exhibition, which was hosted by a Marie Antoinette avatar, and co-created with the Bradley University. Activities included streamed-in videos, and residents being able to create their own in-world movies, called machinima. SLL2 also hosts the Renaissance Island, an authentic recreation of a Tudor English town, which offers history students the chance to explore and take part in an authentic virtual world environment; even to present

their research projects to other residents (Bell et al, p.56). These are but a few examples of the diverse ways in which libraries have tried to engage a wide variety of users with educational material they would not otherwise normally access.

Further amalgamation between MUVes and learning environments has been achieved by an open source project, SLOODLE (Simulation Linked Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), which integrates the learning platform Moodle with *Second Life* and *OpenSim* (Livingstone and Kemp, 2008).

Specialist Libraries in *Second Life*

It is true that specialist libraries have found an interesting outlet in *Second Life*. An example of this is the Bradley University's Cullom-Davis Library, which Bell et al. describe as helping in the process of their Marie Antoinette exhibition, and which houses an horology collection².

But there are also born-virtual specialist libraries, of which SLL2's Caldeon branch library is a particularly successful example. Caldeon and its residents live out their virtual lives in a 19th century, steampunk-themed town, with a rich backstory and culture of its own (Hedreen et al, 2008). The library serves as a public library, but also as a wider Special Collection because of its specialised material. This collection reflects its host community in its content – primary source and research materials from the 19th century, and secondary materials which relate to Caldeon's interests. Writings by Caldeon residents are also collected in a 'Local Authors' section.

Caldeon branch library is an example of a library that has been both defined by and created for its users. As Hedreen et al note:

Such a mixture may merely reflect an eclecticism of interests on the part of a patron population or it may be more unified; in either case it is worth serving. For a special collection, however, it may be more: it may be a chance to support a very exciting kind of groundbreaking, path-forging, richly syncretic scholarship (p.185).

In this case, the virtual collection is both a unique academic resource and the touchstone of a virtual, online community.

² Horology is the study of the art and science of time-keeping.

The advantages of a virtual world library

The advantages of virtual world libraries have already been touched upon previously, in that they are useful in reaching users who can't or don't access real world libraries. But in what other aspects are virtual world libraries useful?

Online library services are nothing new. Access to libraries via email, IM (instant messaging) and the 'Ask a Librarian' feature have been in use since the 1990s. These are more often than not asynchronous, and cannot provide the same kind of one-on-one service that is available in a physical environment. Whilst still online, virtual world libraries create a 'space' that mimics real life, where avatar-librarians can walk users through the library and guide them to a resource (Erdman, 2007). Zhao, Sun and Li also highlight the importance of this realism, which can 'accommodate different types of activities and provide various communication ways to users' (p. 4). Previously, communication between librarians and patrons was limited to chat and IM; however, Linden Labs has now developed an audio messaging system, which can be utilised simply by using a microphone or headset. This adds to the realism and overall usefulness of the space (Zamarripa, 2010).

As is best seen in the Caledon branch library, one of SL's strengths is that it is able to open up the world of genre and niche literature, and thus serve patrons whose interests are not well-served in the real world. The internet has been a natural place for such people to congregate, and Hedreen et al applaud SL for being a space where 'the appreciation and enjoyment of specific types of literature is an exciting vehicle for promoting recreational reading, literacy and creative writing' (p. 178). It is probably for this reason that Caledon's library has proved so popular, and become such an integral part of the Caledon virtual community.

Networking is also a big bonus for the library and information professional. For the first time, librarians are able to meet and interact from all over the globe, without having to worry about travel and costs (Tang, 2009). Likewise, users may access virtual world libraries from anywhere in the world. This is aided by in-world software that translates twenty-two languages for free. Both staff and users have the opportunity to attend lectures, workshops, and book talks – but with a wider catchment area than would be possible in the real world.

Lastly, Wicks (2009) has highlighted the problem of outreach to 'digital natives' who are used to finding information via the internet and don't make use of their local library. As she points out:

Using a virtual environment such as Second Life may provide relevance to the lives of “digital natives” ... because most students are familiar with computer games ... and may be eager to explore a new environment found on the computer (p. 78).

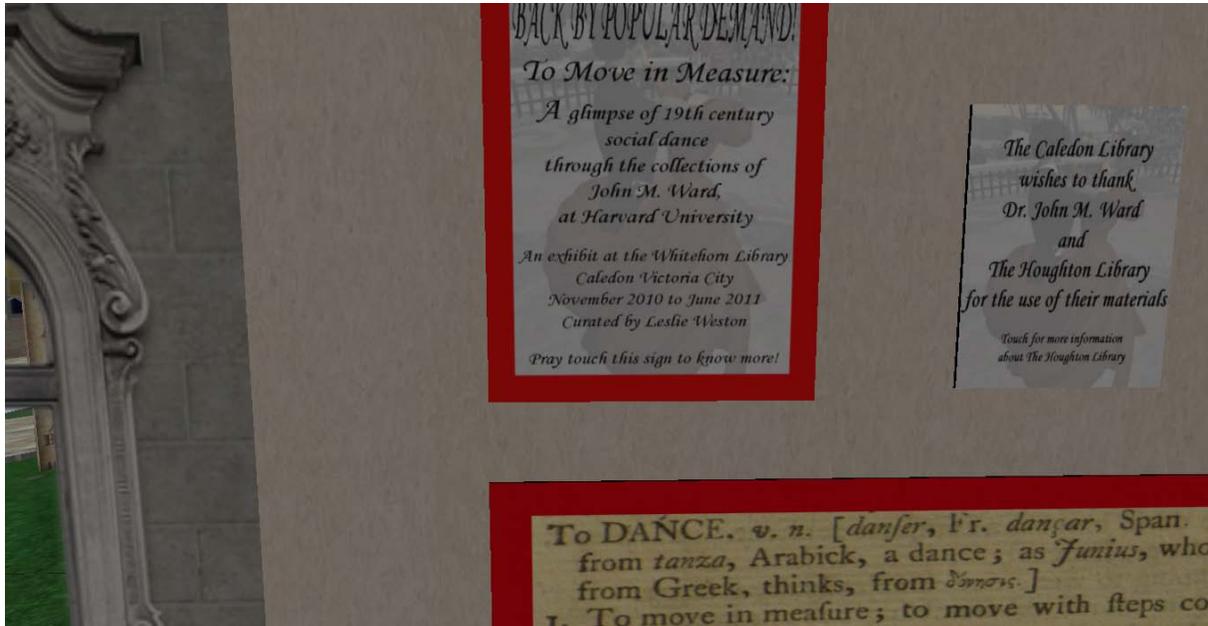


Figure 1 - An example of exhibition advertisements at Caledon Library (Courtesy of Cathy Anderson, *Cathy's distance education, photography blog*, 2010).

Challenges facing virtual libraries

In 2009, Stimpson made a study of 8 public libraries which had virtual counterparts in *Second Life*. In visiting these virtual sites, she discovered that ‘it was rare for me to find another avatar browsing’ (p. 18). With so much to offer, why is it that some virtual libraries are turning into ‘ghost sims’ (the virtual equivalent of a ghost town)?

Stimpson uses the Cleveland Public Library as an example of a ‘ghost sim’. Whilst their SL incarnation opened to much fanfare in 2008, since then there has been little resident traffic. Stimpson found that there were no activities being planned, no events being advertised, and no mention of the SL library on the Cleveland Public Library website. A basic reality of virtual worlds is that participants are there to interact and create. A library that does nothing to engage visitors is basically signing its own death knell. Stimpson warns:

In order for public libraries to attract and retain real-world patrons and residents alike as virtual world users, librarians cannot fall into the Plan, Implement and Forget trap (p. 19).

As well as gaining patrons, problem patrons or 'griefers' pose a challenge. Thompson (2009a) makes reference to the sometimes extreme behaviours some visitors to Info Island can resort to, often for no apparent reason. This can be difficult to deal with when there are barriers to effective communication, and to facial and vocal expression. Whilst there are powers to eject griefers temporarily or permanently, dealing with such extreme actions can be traumatic to deal with when they are without any real world context.

Patrons are not the only challenge. The staff are also a challenge in themselves, as they are almost entirely volunteers. This means that the very existence of a virtual world library is reliant on the continued goodwill of its staff members. Not only this, but Thompson (2009b) highlights the difficulty of managing 'virtual volunteers'; how is it possible to motivate volunteers when: a) communication is not as effective as in real life, and b) most volunteers and their manager will not have met face-to-face? This creates an inherent lack of authority, and Thompson does concede that this can create a more informal work atmosphere than it would in a bricks-and-mortar library. Nevertheless, she stresses the need for managers to be visible and to maintain a 'virtual social presence' (p. 425). This may be a tall order for librarians who are acting as virtual librarians in their own leisure time.

Blankenship and Hollingsworth (2009) make it clear that this is an issue not to be taken lightly. For one thing, mastering SL is no mean feat. Participants take about 'ten hours to feel comfortable enough to venture out into the Second Life worlds' (p. 434), and the learning curve is steep, especially for those not used to being in online worlds.

In their study, Blankenship and Hollingsworth found that the main issues librarians had with SL were:

- Library administration's perceived ambivalence towards virtual world libraries
- A perception that there were already too many tasks to perform in their real world libraries
- Inadequate computers with poor connectivity and security software that hampered use of the virtual world software.

A combination of all the above meant that librarians were increasingly performing their virtual world duties in their own homes after hours, where they possessed better hardware and broadband connections. Volunteers also felt that library administration had little understanding of the work required to maintain the virtual world library, and that this lack of support was a major source of frustration (p. 436).

Last is the problem of the collection. Because of copyright and licensing issues, it is extremely difficult for a virtual world library to build one (Erdman, 2007; Thompson, 2009a; Joint, 2010). As such, virtual world collections are limited only to web resources, open-access databases, and works in the public domain. Some SL libraries have opted to create virtual books (collaborating with Project Gutenberg, for example – see Fig 2), but this is fraught with its own problems. First, reading large amounts of text online is cumbersome and not ideal. Second, creating virtual items such as books requires some skill that most librarians may not have without some training.

As Joint (p. 420) notes, *Second Life* is ‘not much of a digital library if it cannot promote the really good content on which most library budgets are spent!’



Figure 2 - Books in the Second Life Library 2.0's Cybrary, made in collaboration with Project Gutenberg (Courtesy of Cathy Anderson, *Cathy's distance education, photography blog*, 2010).

Conclusion

New technologies have always afforded libraries new ways of reaching prospective patrons, and virtual worlds offer a unique way of connecting with users. The benefits are great; but there are still serious problems that require attention if virtual world libraries are to last long term. The American Library Association has already closed its ALA Island (Tairov, 2011), and one can only speculate as to why that might be. However, this closure bears witness to the fact that virtual world libraries are not immune to the problems faced by their real world counterparts.

One might conclude that the challenges facing virtual world libraries are just another part of the challenges that face libraries as a whole. Yet if libraries wish to maintain an online presence at all, and to continue to discover ways in which to engage 'digital native' users, several issues need to be addressed. These may be listed as follows:

- Library administration needs to acknowledge, even reward, the work of its volunteers.
- Libraries need better computer hardware and broadband connections if volunteers are able to effectively perform their virtual world tasks.
- Libraries need to actively market their virtual world counterparts both online and in-branch, and continue to plan a wide range of activities in order to engage and retain patrons.
- Copyright and licensing laws need to make provisions for virtual world libraries in order for them to build adequate collections.

These are all challenges that face the future of the virtual library, and consequently all libraries as entities in themselves. If they are not addressed, then it is possible that in 5 years the virtual world library will be doomed to the fate of the 'ghost sim' – spaces that have something to offer, but no one to give and to receive. And if that becomes the case, then libraries are in danger of losing a vital point of access into the digital world and its 'native' denizens.

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