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More Questions than Answers: The Reflections of Maggie Kohime, a Virtual Librarian In Second Life

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Introduction

Second Life (SL) is a 3D virtual environment, established by Linden Lab or Linden Research Inc to give it its full title, in 2003[1]. It is not the only 3D virtual world being investigated by educators for its facility to support learning and teaching but it is probably the best known and most widely used. Indeed, according to Wikipedia[2] over 20 million accounts have been set up globally since its launch. Linden Lab gives the figure as "over 11,396,083 (and growing)". However only about 1.5m of these have been active in the last 6 months, it is not clear how many people have more than one avatar and the numbers logged in at any one time is nearer 40,000-50,000[3]. Registering for an account in SL is free, you can set up any number of accounts, represented by different avatars (an avatar is a computer user's representation of themselves), whose appearance can be altered as much as and as often as you like. However to own land costs real money, translated into Linden dollars, the currency of SL.

Maggie Kohime (Lyn Parker in Second Life) was born on 26th April 2007. When registering your avatar you have to pick from a list of available surnames but can choose any first name you like such as Dragonslayer, Intellagirl, or standard names such as Maggie, so long as it has not already been used. As the Development Librarian at the University of Sheffield it is my role to investigate new technologies and their potential to support library services. I also am involved with our VLE (WebCT) or MOLE (My Online Learning Environment) as it is known within the university portal. Amongst other project work, I develop and support online interactive tutorials through WebCT to embed information literacy (IL) in the curriculum and liaise with academics to provide suitable activities and assessment of IL so that we can fulfil our goal that a Sheffield graduate is information literate.[4] There was a growing interest at the University in the potential of Second Life, given the Gartner Report statement "80% of active internet users will have a 'second life' by 2011"[5], although most people who had avatars were only dabbling in it initially. My progress initially was slow. I visited lots of places in SL including the Sistine Chapel, the Heart Murmur Sim and the Spaceflight Museum and searched under universities, campus and libraries to find out what other educational institutions were doing. Although I could see the potential of 3D environments in teaching design, whether fashion or architecture, health or business, I was still pondering where library services fitted into this 'brave new world' and whether it offered librarians the potential to do anything differently or just adapt resources and services we were already offering elsewhere. I also had concerns about how students would react to courses held in SL, what support they would need in terms of induction, technology and security.

Issues

The range of challenges, issues and concerns which need to be considered before introducing SL to students is considerable. Second Life requires a fairly powerful PC with at least broadband access and

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[1] Linden Research Inc. (2007) What is Second Life? Available from: http://secondlife.com/whatis/ Accessed 14th December 2007.

[2] Second Life entry in Wikipedia Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life Accessed 14th December 2007.

[3] Linden Research Inc. (2007) Second Life: Economic Statistics available from: http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php Accessed 14th December 2007.

[4] University of Sheffield (2007) Shaping Our Learning Teaching & Assessment Future. Available from: http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/04/83/65/TLSU%20report2.pdf Accessed 14th December 2007.

[5] Gartner (2007) Gartner Says 80 Percent of Active Internet Users Will Have A "Second Life" in the Virtual World by the End of 2011 Available from: http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861 Accessed 14th December 2007

a good graphics card[6]. It will not run on a wireless connection and is not yet available on the university's managed desktop for all students. I can use it at work on my university machine but as yet am struggling to install it on my home PC or use a university laptop with my home modem. The software is updated frequently and can take a while for revisions to settle down, often crashing the user out at inopportune moments. Given that the majority of use is by Americans, and therefore in the evening for me, I either have to stay at work to participate or catch up through chat logs. The learning curve to functioning proficiently in SL, walking around without falling over or bumping into things, flying and social niceties like waving or laughing, is relatively steep, although potentially easier for gamers and the net generation. All avatars have to go through Orientation Island and learn how to move around by walking, flying or teleporting, change their appearance, communicate and record their activities. However, course developers need to consider carefully what activities they build for their students so that they engage them and see the educational benefits of the environment rather than as another social networking area where they can hang out with their friends. Scalability may be an issue as only so many avatars can inhabit individual areas at any one time. From a security perspective, students need to be aware of potential risks, although Linden Labs banned gambling in July 2007, and, as with any social networking tool, they need to learn how to protect their identity and learn how to evaluate other people's authenticity and credentials. Communication can be by chat, instant messaging or Voice. Voice is a relatively new feature, requires additional equipment such as a headset with a microphone and a sound card for the PC or Mac, something that not all our university machines have as standard.

Involvement with Department of Information Studies

Then in May 2007, I attended the Eduserv Foundation Symposium, *Virtual Worlds, Real Learning?* The Symposium was organised by Andy Powell from Eduserv and conducted both in Real Life and in Second Life. Although billed as any virtual world, it discussed mainly Second Life and its relevance and applicability to learning.[7][8] Various initiatives were described and explained and the benefits and potential issues surrounding the use of Second Life were explored. I found the day fascinating but more importantly met up with Sheila Webber from the Department of Information Studies (DIS) at the University of Sheffield and discovered not only what other librarians were doing in Second Life but also what was happening within my own institution and Sheila's plans to investigate SL's potential for information literacy research. Various reports and papers on Second Life were also published over the summer, adding to my knowledge and interest.[9][10][11]

In July, Sheila applied to Eduserv for temporary office space on Eduserv Island in order to set up the Centre for Information Literacy Research. This was launched on 3rd August.[12] Sheila has been hosting a series of discussions in the Centre for Information Literacy Research within Second Life and I have been able to lead in-world seminars focusing on my questions:

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[6] Second Life (2007) Systems requirements Available from: http://secondlife.com/corporate/sysreqs.php Accessed 18th December 2007

[7] Eduserv Foundation (2007) Eduserv Foundation Symposium Presentations. Available from: http://www.eduserv.org.uk/foundation/symposium/2007/presentations/ Accessed 14th December 2007.

[8] Walk, Paul (2007) Eduserv Foundation Symposium 2007: Virtual Worlds, Real Learning? *Ariadne* Issue 52 Available from: http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue52/eduserv-rpt/ Accessed 14th December 2007.

[9] Fetshcerin, M. & Lattemann, C. (2007) User acceptance of virtual worlds: an explorative study about Second Life. Available from: http://www.fetscherin.com/UserAcceptanceVirtualWorlds.htm Accessed 18th December 2007.

[10] Grassian, e. & Trueman, R.B. (2007) Stumbling, bumbling, teleporting and flying … librarian avatars in Second Life. *Reference Services Review* 35 (1), 84-89

[11] Kirremuir, J. (2007) A July 2007 'snapshot' of UK Higher and Further Education Developments in Second Life. Available from: http://www.eduserv.org.uk/upload/foundation/sl/uksnapshot072007/final.pdf Accessed 18th December 2007.

[12] Adventures of Yoshikawa (2007) Launch! Available from: http://adventuresofyoshikawa.blogspot.com/2007/08/launch.html Accessed 18th December 2007.

- Appearance within Second Life; is it important and how does it affect how you behave? How should librarians therefore be presenting themselves in Second Life? Do we need to label ourselves and how do we ensure privacy and confidentiality as we start to develop an academic virtual world?
- What role should librarians be taking in Second Life? What library services do we need in the virtual world? Do we need to replicate the Real World or do things differently and if so, what and how?

Sheila keeps a blog of her adventures in Second Life[13] where she reports on various events and the discussions have also been logged and are available from http://sleeds.org/chatlog/?c=124, http://sleeds.org/chatlog/?c=125 and http://sleeds.org/chatlog/?c=152

Holding and chairing virtual seminars is interesting in itself, when considering protocol and how much time to spend on introductions when conversing with avatars, keeping a track of what has been said if parallel discussions start up and summarising the main points. Definitely an art in itself!

CILASS project

Sheila Webber then made a bid to CILASS, the Centre for Inquiry Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield, to buy a SL island (called **Infolit iSchool**) for a year, for IBL and information literacy activities. She is using it initially with level one BSc Information Management students. Although part of the net generation, none of the students had used a 3D virtual world before and certainly not Second Life (given that it is 18+ only). Various activities had been designed for them to complete and I and another librarian from St Andrews have been helping Sheila support them in world. As part of a class assignment they have undertaken critical incident interviews with each other in SL, with tutors acting as observers, and compared that with interviewing people in Real Life. They have set up interviews with SL residents about a time when the SL resident had an information need relating to a SL activity and asked them to compare SL behaviour with Real Life information behaviour models and research. Students have learnt how to log their discussion and then analyse the transcripts in relation to RL information behaviour models.

I see the CILASS project as an opportunity to explore Second Life more fully, particularly in its application to learning and teaching and to test different library models of support with 'real students'. I am interested in what assistance students need in using a virtual 3D world, around the technology itself and information literacy. The present search tools are not very sophisticated and there is a definite need to be able to evaluate sites, avatars and information. Sheila considers SL as "a new learning and teaching space: more like a classroom than a website – but one where you (and the students) can redesign and rebuild the classroom overnight, and have tutorials sitting on the beach if you want." [14]

Library services in Second Life

Librarians are already in Second Life in considerable numbers; providing reference services, offering tours, building libraries, linking to digital collections and web pages and sharing information. Are these activities different to our RL activities? What scope does the environment give us to enable us to do things differently? One of the advantages of Second Life is the opportunity to interact with people from around the world within a collaborative environment and explore these issues together. There are already over 40 libraries in Second Life, mainly in Cybrary City on Second Life's Info Island, a purpose built space for libraries to showcase their resources and develop the skills needed to provide library services within this 3D environment. Grouping of the libraries together rather than positioning

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[13] Adventures of Yoshikawa (2007) Available from: http://adventuresofyoshikawa.blogspot.com/ Accessed 18th December 2007

[14] Webber, S. (2007) Second Life. *CILASS Newsletter* Issue 1 (To be published Dec. 2007)

them with their institution allows more networking and sharing of expertise to take place. University College Dublin was the first Irish library in Second Life and their Second Life branch is included on their web pages with details of their services: a "reader survey, query box service, e-mail service, access to web-based resources and blogs, presentations and some e-books"[15].

We now have space on Infolit iSchool to create our own library. It already has a name, The Wilf Saunders Library, after the founding Director of the Department of Information Studies who died this year. But, what sort of library should we create? Should we replicate a branch library in the real world or create something different? The argument for replicating your RL buildings online is to offer users some familiarity with the environment. However, this can also lead to dissatisfaction as functionality is so different and systems do not operate in the same way. It certainly seems an opportunity to try out new things and I am now busy learning how to create tools and furniture, find where to buy in library goods and how to copy others' ideas, whilst acknowledging my sources obviously!

Conclusion

I can only repeat that I have ended up with more questions than answers. Second Life has been compared to the Internet in the 1990s, a testing ground for new ideas and ways of networking. The communication aspect is really important and has enormous potential. There is a role for information literacy in helping users know how the search functions and where certain kinds of resources, whether goods, people or places, can be found; a new role for librarians or a trivial pursuit? This particular librarian is still investigating and exploring and open to the possibilities.

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[15] University College, Dublin (2007) Branch Libraries Available from:
http://www.ucd.ie/library/about/branch_libraries/index.html Accessed 14th December 2007.