Introduction

Virtual worlds are here to stay. They are not a short-lived fad. They are not pet rocks. As a profession, librarianship needs to work through its tendency toward denial—we did the same thing when the World Wide Web first hit it big—and begin exploring how librarianship can survive and thrive in virtual worlds. It will take an ongoing, broad-based professional effort. If past technological revolutions are any indication of what may happen in the future, virtual worlds will continue to expand into our collective lives and add interesting new features and experiential opportunities. At the same time, the tech bar for having a meaningful VW experience, which admittedly currently is quite high for most virtual worlds, will continue to lower. Eventually we will arrive at the day, just as we did with telephones and televisions, where nearly everyone in the developed world who wants or needs to be active in virtual worlds will be able to do so. Many people in the developing world, too, will be active in virtual worlds. From their inception, most virtual worlds are global in nature.

This report is written primarily for representatives from real-world libraries and library-related organizations (consortia, associations, vendors, etc.) who currently are seriously considering having their organization attempt to create a presence in one or more virtual worlds. Although entrepreneurial librarians who want to start libraries and library-related organizations in virtual worlds that are not tied directly to real-world libraries and library-related organizations may gain some knowledge from reading this report, the focus of this report is on the issues and questions real-world libraries must consider and address as they plan to expand (or migrate entirely) into one or more VW environments.

As representatives from libraries and library-related organizations scramble to decide if (and, if so, how) the creation of an organizational presence in one or more virtual worlds is feasible and worthwhile, two basic "brick wall" situations must at least be considered. The first potential brick wall is the possibility that the future of VW librarianship may be dominated by freelance professional librarians, rather than by libraries and library-related organizations as organizations. Such a situation may seem preposterous at first glance, but bear in mind that to date, most of the successful library initiatives in the virtual world called Second Life have been achieved primarily by library professionals working and collaborating in a freelance or pro bono fashion, not necessarily under the auspices of one or more existing real-world organizations. As an organization, the Alliance Library System in Illinois has provided a tremendous amount of organizational support for library initiatives in Second Life and other virtual worlds, but the Alliance is almost the exception that proves the general rule that the future of VW librarianship may belong to inventive, creative, energetic freelance librarians acting alone or in loose collaborative groups, not via formal organizational structures and consortial agreements. This situation may change as virtual worlds in general and VW librarianship in particular mature, but the early years of VW librarianship seem to belong to creative individuals, not organizations. As your real-world library considers the question of VW librarianship, don't let the urge to "keep up with the Joneses" (i.e., other real-world libraries) blind you to the possibility that your real-world library organization may be competing primarily with go-it-alone professional librarians.

The other distinct brick wall possibility is that real-world libraries and library-related organizations may already have two strikes against them in light of the fact that they were born and raised in the real world. As real-world organizations of all types (corporations, small

businesses, not-for-profit organizations, governmental bodies, etc.) strive to create a presence in one or more virtual worlds, they may find that they bring lots of organizational baggage, assumptions, structures, and constraints with them from the real world that may slow or misdirect their efforts to create and sustain a viable presence in virtual worlds. Early efforts by real-world organizations at presence building in virtual worlds sometimes have resulted in false starts, dead ends, and comedies of errors. Born-virtual libraries, organizations, corporations, and governments, on the other hand, won't be carrying all that baggage of real-world assumptions, organizational charts, commitments, and "ways of thinking about and doing things" in general. The race to the VW future may go to the fleet of foot with little or no baggage from the world of bricks and mortar, or even from the two-dimensional Web. Just as Microsoft has had a tough time, compared to, say, Google in creating and maintaining a strong presence on the Web, so too may a born-on-the-Web company like Google experience a difficult time competing with born-virtual companies.

What if, in similar fashion, the dominant traits of VW librarianship are hewn and burnished primarily by virtual "natives" (born after the dawn of virtual worlds) and by born-virtual organizations and governments, not by real-world libraries and library-related organizations struggling to develop a meaningful, worthwhile, and sustained VW presence? This question in itself may be a powerful argument in favor of real-world libraries diving into the VW fray now rather than later in the hope of even standing a chance in the coming competition to provide information services and experiences to a burgeoning VW population. Your real-world library or library-related organization may already be in a virtual fight for its organizational life, unbeknownst to you, because born-virtual library-related initiatives may come to rule the VW roost.

Many libraries and library-related organizations are seriously considering or actively pursuing the development of a presence in one or more virtual worlds. This is part of a larger trend whereby many real-world organizations, including for-profit companies, not-for-profit companies, governmental agencies, cultural organizations, and other groups that came into existence in the real world are striving to break into the VW environment.

Many *avatars* die on the vine. (An avatar is the thing that represents you in a virtual world. It may look uncannily like you, or it may be younger, slimmer, and more attractive than you are in the real world. It may be an animal, or a two-dimensional icon, or just about anything. It depends on the virtual world and your own imagination.) They are created with enthusiasm, but soon fall into disuse. As libraries and library-related organizations consider developing a presence in one or more virtual worlds, they will need to consider the persistence of the various demographic groups that are exploring virtual worlds. Virtual worlds may evolve into another workplace that is less dependent on travel to in-person meetings, or they may evolve into primarily the playgrounds of tweens and teens. Thirty-something parents may find in virtual worlds a great way to get out of the house without actually leaving their physical houses (and their children).

Virtual worlds themselves come and go as well. Some are rising stars, attracting more users, developing interesting new in-world communities, and extending the boundaries of culture, creative expression, and the interaction with information in interesting ways. Other virtual worlds never make it beyond the initial press release about plans to develop them. We seem to be in the rough-and-tumble Wild West phase in the overall development of virtual worlds. Some libraries may see this as reason enough to adopt a wait-and-see attitude toward developing a library presence in virtual worlds. Other libraries and library-related organizations, perhaps trying to learn from hard lessons about fence-sitting while the Web as a rich information environment developed without significant input from trained information professionals, argue that this is exactly the right time and the right reason for libraries to become involved in virtual worlds.

For libraries and library-related organizations interested in developing a presence in one or more virtual worlds, this issue of *Library Technology Reports* may prove s useful tool for understanding the breadth and depth of the VW scene, including both virtual worlds already launched and those that are still in the development and planning stages, as well as some of the key issues, questions, and opportunities libraries and library-related organizations should consider as they explore the need for and prospects of VW librarianship.