

Issues to Consider

The Costs of Developing a VW Presence

There is no free lunch, not even in the metaverse. Libraries and library-related organizations will need to fund and budget for their forays into VW librarianship. Nevertheless, there are many interesting opportunities for innovative funding and budgeting. For several reasons, VW librarianship may motivate libraries to rethink and re-imagine how they create budgets and allocate resources. First, open-source-ish in-world creative communities of volunteers with very professional skills are having a major impact on several virtual worlds. While real-world librarianship in toto is still struggling to accept and integrate open-source software solutions into their bricks-and-mortar and Web-based operations, collaborative communities of experts may already have established a turf in virtual worlds with deep roots that for-profit library vendors and traditionally organized libraries may find difficult to uproot.

Secondly, there are new sources of revenue generation in virtual worlds. Libraries in VW environments can rent out space and services to other organizations and individuals. A library could create a library building or space in a virtual world that has a resident population in the library as well. There may be many people who would love to have their avatars live on the library grounds. While real-world libraries generally attract the indigent looking for a place to sleep and clean up, as well as access information, VW libraries may offer a gentrified, highly desirable address for resident avatars.

Thirdly, the built environments of virtual worlds have different affordances than built environments in the real world. In most virtual worlds, it is comparatively easy, quick, and inexpensive to build an environment, and it is easy to morph and reconfigure the built environment. As I watch skillful librarians in virtual worlds such as Second Life reconfigure a built library environment over

the course of a few hours to meet changing needs or just to refresh the ambient environment, I think back to how difficult and expensive it has been in the real world to get a wall built into an existing bricks-and-mortar library. All this means that the budgetary relationships between start-up costs and ongoing costs of a VW library initiative need to be rethought.

Peters notes that “the best means for developing an organization presence in a virtual world remains open to much speculation and debate.”¹ Some libraries and library-related organizations seem to overinvest initially in building a fancy building and environs in a virtual world, only to realize that events and exhibits are the investment areas that will attract patron-avatars to their new virtual-world library.

Ownership, Intellectual Property, and Rights Management

The fundamental concepts of ownership, intellectual property, and rights management take some interesting twists and turns in VW environments.

The fact that all virtual worlds have an overall owner/developer, such as Linden Lab in Second Life and Numedeon in Whyville, may be perceived as similar to or different from the basic situation in the real world, depending on your religious beliefs about the existence and characteristics of some prime mover. Locally hosted virtual worlds, which may become all the rage for universities and corporations, may obviate this situation a bit, where the university or corporation becomes the locally deputized prime mover for that specific VW instance.

The ability to protect intellectual property rights is a key component of any virtual world. Seiler reports that

the copyright protection issue in virtual worlds is the main reason why Google's Lively at its public beta launch in July 2008 did not enable anyone to build: "Built in part on Emergent's Gamebryo technology, the system includes everything from interactive objects and avatars to particle effects. What Google is still working on, and part of the reason content creation is restricted, is a copyright protection system."²

Sex, Gambling, and Terms of Service

Some libraries and/or their parent organizations (universities, colleges, municipalities) are reluctant to become involved in VW librarianship because of what they perceive as some of the more deleterious aspects of life in virtual worlds (sex, gambling, etc.) or because of the terms of service espoused by the companies behind the development of these virtual worlds.

Timing

One of the most difficult aspects of planning is timing. A great project plan can be doomed to fail if the timing is off, if it arrives on the scene too early or too late. As libraries and library-related organizations plan to develop presences in one or more virtual worlds, the issue of timing often is hotly debated. Many librarians may argue that virtual worlds are too new and inchoate to warrant serious library development at this time. It may be better to adopt a wait-and-see attitude about virtual worlds, they argue, if for no other reason to see how the populations of resident avatars develop and stabilize.

Another group of librarians, who advocate developing library presences in virtual worlds now rather than later, point to how the wait-and-see attitude arguably adopted by libraries and librarianship toward the early rapid development of the World Wide Web seriously diminished the impact libraries and librarianship had on the development of information systems and services on the Web. Stated bluntly, if librarians had been more aggressive in developing library services on the Web, would Google have quickly become one of the largest companies in the world, when measured in terms of market capitalization, by developing cognate systems and services?

Regardless of where you, the individual reader, stand on this fundamental timing issue, it is the author's belief that eventually all libraries and library-related organizations must decide when and how they will enter the VW librarianship, just as by now nearly all libraries have decided when and how they will develop a Web presence. The decision may be put off, and put off profitably, but it cannot be avoided indefinitely.

Metrics: Studying the Attitudes and Behaviors of Avatars

If your library or library-related organization has become or is planning to become involved in virtual worlds, it will want to know what type of impact and success it is achieving. Of course, it is possible to port over to virtual worlds many of the data and feedback collection tools and techniques that were developed for the real world, such as opinion surveys and focus groups.

It also is possible to capture behavioral data about what avatars who visit your VW space are doing. How many times have avatars accessed the information contained on a poster in your virtual library? How often have avatars visited the virtual display you created about some timely topic? Finding hard data that helps answer these questions involves the use of metrics. The Wikipedia entry for metrics describes them as "a set of ways of quantitatively and periodically measuring, assessing, controlling or selecting a person, process, event, or institution, along with the procedures to carry out measurements and the procedures for the interpretation of the assessment in the light of previous or comparable assessments."³

Previous and comparable assessments in the world of bricks-and-mortar libraries include turnstile counts and circulation statistics for books and other library materials. Web server log statistics provide data on how many people are visiting your library's Web site. In the same vein, VW metrics can provide data and insights into how many avatars are visiting your VW library, how they are exploring and using the collections and services, and how long they spend in your virtual presence.

Key Questions to Ask

- What is the main purpose or activity of the virtual world? Is it essentially a work place, a learning place, or a fun place?
- What is the nature of the resident population? What is the average age of residents? Is there gender balance? From which areas of the real world do the people behind the resident avatars hail?
- Who owns or controls the virtual world as a whole? Is it a large real-world corporation, a start-up business, a not-for-profit organization, or an individual or small group? What to they hope to achieve by creating and hosting this virtual world?
- What are the technical requirements to have a meaningful and worthwhile experience in the virtual world? How many library users and library staff will be able to clear the tech bar?

Key Questions to Ask (cont.)

- Is the user interface easy to learn and intuitive to use?
- Does the virtual world offer all the essential functions needed by your library, your users, and your parent organization?
- How accessible is the virtual world to earthlings with vision, hearing, or motor impairments?

Notes

1. Tom Peters, "The Cost of a Virtual Presence," *Smart Libraries Newsletter* (June 2008): 6–7.
2. Joey Seiler, 2008. "Lively—Google's Contribution to the 3D Social Web," *Virtual Worlds News*, July 8, 2008, available online at www.virtualworldsnews.com/2008/07/google-announce.html (accessed July 8, 2008).
3. Wikipedia, "Metrics," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metrics> (accessed July 14, 2008).
4. Seiler, "Lively."

Interoperability and the Portability of Resources

Whenever any individual or organization invests lots of time, talent, money, and other resources in building and developing something in a virtual world, a shuddering question eventually dawns on them: What if this virtual world goes away or becomes a ghost world? What will I be able to salvage from all of the blood, sweat, and tears I have invested in this world? These questions give rise to the need and strong desire for interoperability between virtual worlds and the ability to port resources from one world to the next. For example, if I build a really cool information experience in Second Life, but then Second Life goes the way of Gopher, I would like to be able port that information experience over to the next big virtual world.

Google seemed to heed this need when they launched Lively in July 2008, because they intend to integrate Lively communities and communication with existing 2D Web social networks, such as Facebook and MySpace.⁴