

Future Intersections

Second Life Library

Although future intersections of gaming and libraries may largely still be uncharted territory for librarians and information professionals, there is a recently created game-like, virtual-reality environment showing a great deal of potential for this overlap. Assistant Professor Kate Williams (Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois) has suggested the idea of librarians setting up library operations within game worlds (see chapter 5, note 26), and Lori Bell, director of innovation at the Alliance Library System (ALS) in Illinois, is already well on her way with just such a project—the *Second Life* Library.

Inspired by presentations at the *Computers in Libraries* Conference (March 2006) and a subsequent post from The Shifted Librarian Blog (that I author), Bell started thinking about how to take library services into the virtual world *Second Life* (SL).¹

SL isn't really a game per se, although it looks like one, and users can certainly play games in it. SL is a three-dimensional virtual world that started in 2003. As of the end of August 2006, it had more than half a million "residents" from around the world, who interact with each other in many ways.

Users log in to the *Second Life* Web site, create an avatar, and then explore the SL world by walking, flying, dancing, chatting with other players, and engaging in other traditional game-like activities; the difference is that there is no specific task, goal, or quest an individual must accomplish. SL is an open-ended virtual experience, and in it, you can build what you want (a house, a business, a rocket, etc.), do what you want, or just walk around endlessly. Here is how the SL Web site describes this world:

- From the moment you enter the World you'll discover a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity. Once you've explored a bit, perhaps you'll find a perfect parcel of land [on which] to build your house or business.
- You'll also be surrounded by the Creations of your fellow residents. Because residents retain the rights to their digital creations, they can buy, sell, and trade with other residents.
- The Marketplace currently supports millions of US dollars in monthly transactions. This commerce is handled with the in-world currency, the Linden dollar, which can be converted to US dollars at several thriving online currency exchanges.²

The open-ended nature of the world allows for a variety of interesting activities. For example, businesses like Wells Fargo have opened up an "island," and the company uses this area to teach users about financial responsibility. Also, a medical researcher has built a simulation of what it's like to be schizophrenic in order to forward and share information about the study of the disease and show others what it is like.

Until this year, however, it was a virtual world without an active public library. Attempts had been made to create libraries in the game before, but none had truly succeeded in offering what are traditionally considered as "library services" on a wide scale. Bell had never played in SL before, but she immediately saw the potential.

I started playing around in *Second Life* and found it fascinating. I think this is the next step

for libraries and through this project, we will learn a great deal to help libraries start building a presence in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *Active Worlds*.

I did not have many expectations because this was totally new to me. I am not a gamer, so it took me a lot of time to get used to the environment. It is almost like another culture. There is so much work to be done and so many possibilities that I don't think there is any way we can meet all the expectations we have. Every day, as we get more and more experience in *Second Life*, the expectations change.

We hope to offer reference services, appropriate materials in formats we may not even be able to imagine now, interactive information experiences, and exhibits with library special collections, programs, book discussions, and other services that will be relevant.³

Although Bell admits there's a learning curve for nongamers, she has enjoyed working in this virtual world enough to devote twenty hours a week to getting the *Second Life* Library up and running, sometimes working on the project during her personal time.

She's not alone in this endeavor, though. As news spread about the project, librarians and even nonlibrarians from around the world began volunteering to help with the effort. There are now more than 140 people subscribed to the project's mailing list (<http://groups.google.com/group/alliancesecondlife>) and approximately 30 people working on the project without pay. The librarian running the medical library is from the Netherlands, while the writing/performance center is run by an individual from the United Kingdom. The land manager is from Canada, and there are other volunteers from across the United States. This composition, of individuals from disparate parts of the physical planet Earth, highlights the global nature of not only the *SL* virtual world, but also of the *SL* Library (see figure 26).

"Second Library" on The Shifted Librarian Blog

www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/archives/2006/04/12/second_library.html

Second Life

<http://secondlife.com>

Sign Up for the Second Life Library's Google Group at:

<http://groups.google.com/group/alliancesecondlife>

The group started out with a small building, then later moved to a larger one (see figure 27), and eventually gained its own "island" of virtual real estate—now called "Info Island"—thanks to an anonymous donor.

Bell says this has opened up even more possibilities for the library and its services. During the last few months, the *SL* Library has been able to expand and invite such partners (to have a presence on the island) as:

- TechSoup, an organization that connects nonprofits with discounted technology products;
- an Information & Communications Technology (ICT) Library;
- World Bridges, a group that helps young people from low-income backgrounds;
- Games for Change, the group behind some of the socially positive games mentioned in chapter 1;
- EBSCO, which provided a two-month free trial of its Consumer Health Database for use in the virtual world; and



Figure 26: Collection development meeting of *Second Life* Library volunteers. (Image courtesy of Greg Schwartz, <http://flickr.com/photos/planetneutral/156820509>)



Figure 27: The *Second Life* Library's main building. (Image courtesy of Lori Bell)

- OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), which is working with a group of reference librarians in *Second Life* to use QuestionPoint for virtual reference.

In addition, the group has:

- offered and presented orientations to teach new users about *Second Life* (for example, how to navigate and how to fly);
- presented orientations for users who want to use the *SL* Library;
- offered exhibits, such as one based on an online ALS collection about female Illinois authors;
- hosted programs (such as an event about Henry VIII); and
- even offered an online continuing education event for librarians, in which Michael Stephens (author of *LTR* 42:4, “Web 2.0 & Libraries: Best Practices for Social Software”) taught about “Library 2.0” in real-time and “in-world” simultaneously for the Online Programming for All Libraries (OPAL) service.

So that any player in the *Second Life* Library can ask them a question and get an answer, volunteers staff the reference desk in the library for certain hours each week. There is even a separate building on Info Island that serves as a medical library.

The project has been so successful, especially in terms of collaboration, that Matt Gullett and Kelly Czarnecki (both now at *ImaginOn*) are starting a similar service in *Teen Second Life*, a similar virtual world just for teens (no adults allowed, unless approved by *Second Life*'s owners).⁴

As in the other case studies presented in this issue, support from the director has been one key to Bell's success. ALS executive director Kitty Pope believes that, in five years, every regional library system in Illinois will have a virtual presence, because it's just another way to reach out to the communities they serve.

It took library folks a while to get their heads around the whole idea of a virtual library community, but having invested an hour or so in the ALS Library 2.0, that is all you hear in the staff room. “Have you seen . . . ?” “Never guess who I met in the reading garden last night. . . .” “Why don't we add . . . ?” Lori's enthusiasm is infectious!

However, to be the first and to be on the ground floor of innovation requires that leap of faith. What we can do is share our developmental learning process with other early adopters so they can build on our start. That's why library systems do so very well—share collaboration and build on each others' successes!⁵

The project has also generated some unexpected discussions. When the first building was purchased, and the time came to discuss what to put in it, the participants engaged in a philosophical debate regarding what a library is and what library services look like in a virtual world. Some of the questions included: Should it have books? Should it *look* like it has books? Should the building look traditional or modern? What kinds of services should it offer?

In the next six months, Pope and Bell hope to get funding for a dedicated staff member for the *SL* Library, one who can continue to build this new community and promote its use. To date, ALS has spent only one thousand dollars on the project, using funds from the popular “Libraries Matter” campaign. For the moment, the project is scheduled to run for one year, at which time Tom Peters (a consultant for this effort as well as contributing editor to *Smart Libraries Newsletter* and the ALA TechSource Blog) will evaluate the project and write a report about it. If the project is deemed successful, it will continue. If not, Bell believes there will still be a wealth of data available for librarians who want to do something like this.

Pope is especially interested to see what academic libraries will do with these new “worlds.” She believes they will be willing to embrace it, because they can “provide all of their services to their students in a gated environment.”⁶

Another similar three-dimensional virtual-reality environment, *Active Worlds* (www.activeworlds.com), is also being utilized for some educational purposes. Mark Puterbaugh, from the Eastern University Library in Pennsylvania, presenting at the *Computers in Libraries* Conference in March 2006, discussed implementing a gaming interface on his university's OPAC in *Active Worlds*.⁷

Bell noted that commercial entities, educational institutions, and library users are spending more and more leisure and work time in these virtual worlds and believes that librarians need to be there too.⁸ Pope agrees with Bell, and she views this as an exploration of how library services might evolve in the future. Already the project is considered a success, simply because they have learned so much about a previously unfamiliar world, “Lori Bell is a prime example of the new innovative librarian who needs to be coming out of library school. We need innovators. . . .” believes Pope.⁹

Talking Points

- Talk about going where the users are! Online virtual worlds could offer libraries the chance to reach new audiences in a new way.

"A Library for Avatars," by Tom Peters
www.techsource.ala.org/blog/2006/04/a-library-for-avatars.html

"Getting a Second Life Library," by Tom Peters
(in Smart Libraries Newsletter)
www.techsource.ala.org/sln/june-2006.html

Active Worlds
www.activeworlds.com

- University professors are using *Second Life* and other similar services as virtual classrooms and gathering places. Librarians need to think about how we will offer services to these library users. We also need to begin understanding what their information needs look like in these spaces.
- *Second Life* offers an excellent environment in which to "play" for those librarians who want to experience a virtual world without the pressure of having to perform tasks in a game.

- Librarians can continue investigating the opportunities these environments offer for continuing-education opportunities.

Notes

1. Lori Bell, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 6, 2006.
2. "What Is *Second Life*?" *Second Life* Virtual Community. <http://secondlife.com/whatis> (accessed August 26, 2006).
3. Bell, e-mail to author, June 6, 2006.
4. Matt Gullett and Kelly Czarnecki, informal discussion, ALA Annual, New Orleans, June 2006 (see www.alliancelibrarysystem.com/article.cfm?id=1176).
5. Kitty Pope, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 6, 2006.
6. Ibid.
7. Mark Puterbaugh, "Gaming in Libraries: Active Worlds" presentation at Computers in Libraries conference, March 22, 2006; more information at <http://jenica26.squarespace.com/mermaid/2006/3/22/gaming-and-libraries.html> and www.infodayblog.com/2006/03/gaming-in-libraries.shtml (both URLs accessed September 26, 2006).
8. Bell, e-mail to author, June 6, 2006.
9. Pope, e-mail to author, June 6, 2006.