Stumbling, bumbling, teleporting and flying … librarian avatars in Second Life

Esther Grassian

UCLA College Library, Los Angeles, California, USA, and

Rhonda B. Trueman

Johnson and Wales University, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of issues related to library involvement in a popular virtual world, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORG) Second Life.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews with librarians participating in Second Life expand on the rationale for participating in this 3-D virtual world as well as various uses of Second Life and other new technologies for all types of libraries and librarians.

Findings – Benefits to both libraries and librarians from participating in a virtual world like Second Life include opportunities for collaboration, creativity, learning, and global networking with other librarians, educators, and technologists.
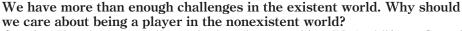
Originality/value – Virtual worlds are new to most libraries, librarians, and administrators. This interview will be of interest and value to all those interested in extending their reach in reference, collections, and information literacy by pushing out to new technological frontiers and exploring and taking risks in virtual areas where users are going.

Keywords Librarians, Internet, Libraries

Paper type General review

Thinking critically about second life

Virtual environments such as Second Life have captured the attention of a wide spectrum of users. Exploring issues in and asking questions about virtual environments can be time consuming. To help readers better understand Second Life, and its potential for libraries, the editors have posed a series of questions to two of our academic library colleagues, librarians Esther Grassian and Rhonda Trueman, librarians who are truly living a second life. Grassian's and Trueman's responses to our questions follow.

We have more than enough challenges in the existent world. Why should we care about being a player in the nonexistent world?

Grassian: Yes, there are challenges in the existent world, or RL (real life), as Second Lifers call it. More and more, these challenges involve the electronic world in one way or another, so in a sense, we have been involved in the "nonexistent" virtual world since the first computers were introduced in libraries. Second Life is an example of the next virtual step beyond the Web. It offers community and connectedness, but also virtual sleaze and virtual violence. Second Life participants are "players" in the sense

of being participants, observing, creating objects, and contributing their knowledge and experience, their very human personalities and efforts to invent and reinvent this virtual world.

Trueman: A virtual world is a nonexistent world insofar as it lacks a physical space, but when people meet, collaborate, and communicate, there is a built-in existence. We use telephones, cell phones, email, instant messages, blogs, Myspace, Flickr, and numerous other ways to communicate that do not involve face-to-face interaction. Second Life is a new and exciting version of this type of communication, with the exception of the fact that within Second Life there is a semblance of a physical world. As librarians we seek to provide access to information; we provide standard reference services and virtual reference services through email or instant messaging. It follows naturally that we would seek to provide reference and other library services through the medium of a virtual world. The answer to this question is simple: we want to be where our users are, and, perhaps more importantly, we want to be where we can make library users out of non-users.

What questions arise when people meet in virtual territories, in virtual libraries, to learn, to share, to play?
Grassian: The first question many people ask when introduced to Second Life is "Where are the other avatars?" We all value personal contact and interaction. It's fun and interesting to chat with others, to observe their behavior and their appearance, and to see how individual personalities come to life in a virtual 3-D world, in contrast to the 2-D world of standalone chat and email. The second question people ask is "How much time does it take to learn Second Life?" Other questions for those who enter Second Life include: How do I change my appearance, how do I move around within Second Life, how do I communicate, how do I organize my own "inventory" of items... All of these questions are very common and to some degree mirror what many of us remember about learning the Web when it was new.

Trueman: Generally, the first questions asked are personal and basic Second Life skills questions, such as how do I sit? How do I move objects? How do I get information from objects? Next, people want to know what resources are available, how they go about getting space for classroom activities, how to present to classes, where to buy or how to create materials, etc. After that comes a questioning of methodology, an exploration of new ideas for instruction, collaboration and creativity. From the beginning, some people may question the need for real-life articles in a virtual world. Why do you need a building when the weather is always perfect in Second Life? Why do we have books? The answer, in my opinion, is that we tend to gravitate toward the familiar, even in a world we can create from scratch.

Why should academic libraries care about reaching the "gaming consumer"?
Grassian: Second Life is not really a game, as there is no real end goal where someone wins a game or scores highly. It is actually a virtual world with many users participating simultaneously in creating their surroundings and objects within it. So Second Life users may or may not be "gaming consumers", but increasingly, our faculty and students are interested in exploring and studying many aspects of Second Life and its residents, as well as other virtual worlds.

Trueman: Second Life is much more than a game. It is an active, growing, learning environment. Gamers are learners. They may learn in non-traditional ways, but there is a depth to education through Second Life that may exceed traditional learning. The learning experience in Second Life can be immersive, collaborative, and creative. When students participate in a learning environment which is familiar and comfortable, gaming, online gaming, and virtual reality, they learn by exploring, by working together, by making mistakes and rectifying them, by coming up with creative and innovative solutions, and most importantly by putting theory into practice.

Should academic libraries come to Second Life? Why? Or, why not?
Grassian: Yes, academic libraries should be exploring a variety of new technologies like Second Life. Some may be dead ends, while others may offer many opportunities to offer library services (collections, reference, instruction) in formats and in locations where our users are going or will go, at least to explore.

Opportunities for collaboration
Grassian: Info Island and the Alliance Library System (ALS), a consortium of 253 Illinois libraries of all types, offer an excellent example of how collaboration of all kinds can engage, motivate and stimulate creativity and growth. ALS established Info Island in Second Life in April 2006, established a main library and a medical library, and has attracted eager and enthusiastic librarian volunteers from libraries worldwide. In addition, ALS agreed to the establishment on Info Island of the ICT Library (educators working with technology in teaching and learning) and Tech Soup (technologists helping non-profits in Second Life with technology needs). These groups are helping and working with each other, in addition to working to achieve their own missions. Faculty are also developing courses and research within Second Life. Librarians have an excellent opportunity to work with faculty in incorporating information literacy into curricula, research, and course assignments as they are designed. We can also work with technologists to develop and utilize new means of helping learners develop a questioning, critical thinking approach to information resources, regardless of their format or physical or virtual location. Librarians around the world are participating in Second Life Library activities and projects. This global connection may also lead to true 24/7 online help, the promise that digital reference offers but has not been able to fulfill up to now.

Opportunities for global community
Grassian: Second Life participants reside in many different countries yet can connect synchronously with each other in real time, opening communication and collaboration networks that go far beyond and incorporate various existing and new technologies, including chat, IM, Web, and much more.

Opportunities for personal connection
Grassian: Social and working interactions in Second Life with other avatars "face to face" provide the kind of personal contact that we get from attending and participating in RL in-person conferences and responding to virtual and email reference but that is missing from email, chat, and IM used on their own.

Opportunities for creativity and enterprise
Grassian: "Machinima" and "chatbots" – what are they? Machinima are videos created within virtual worlds by avatars, with other avatars as actors. Chatbots represent new technology being developed to offer responses to basic reference questions, but with added value – the ability to contextualize the question and the questioner by means of various environmental cues. These represent just two new creative endeavors offered within Second Life and other virtual environments. ALS's open, welcoming, and supportive approach encourages creativity and experimentation of all kinds.

Opportunities for learning and development
Grassian: Librarian volunteers on Info Island offer classes in Second Life technologies and orientation tours to Info Island and to Second Life in general. They hold meetings within Second Life, gently leading others into new technologies through discussion, by example, and by demonstration. We are now investigating grants to support both development of library school/information studies areas and continuing education/professional development within Second Life. Discussion, planning, and development move to implementation at warp speed within Second Life. Think it, discuss it with others, and suddenly it's there! Experimentation and risk-taking are an exciting and stimulating way of life on Info Island and in Second Life in general.

Opportunities to extend our reach
Grassian: Where are your users going these days? Web 2.0 social networks and sites offer contact, community, and connectedness as well as the pluses and minuses of mass opinion. We can extend our reach by going to our potential users, including those who may not know they have an information need, much less where to turn in order to satisfy that need. Who sponsors that Second Life site? What are her/his credentials? What is the purpose of the site – entertainment, education, persuasion, sales? How accurate, complete, and up-to-date is it? Where can I find background information, utilize digital collections, learn how to learn about a topic? Librarians are uniquely positioned to help people learn how to learn, to turn potential users into critical thinking, knowledgeable, effective information "detectives." Going to virtual worlds in addition to real life expands our reach enormously in many arenas.

Trueman: All of the points listed above are excellent reasons to venture into Second Life! Second Life is a global community that provides a level playing field for collaboration, personal connections, creativity and enterprise, learning, and development. In this way, the Second Life world, while virtual and 3-D, is also an excellent example of the phenomenon brought about by technology described by Thomas L. Friedman in *The World Is Flat* (Friedman, T., 2005) *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York). New technologies like Second Life provide the space and the ability for people to meet and work together on fairly equal terms. However, the digital divide is still a consideration, and access to technologies such as these are not available to every individual or even to every institution.

What points should academic libraries consider when entering Second Life?

Grassian: Just as when the Web was new, libraries need to provide encouragement and release time for librarians to explore and learn Second Life so that they can later train others. Academic libraries need to investigate which faculty are considering or already offering courses, doing research, or developing sites within Second Life, and reach out to them for collaboration regarding collections, reference, and instruction.

Trueman: The first point to consider is how the library is to be used. Will it be used to support academic classes being taught in Second Life? Will it be used to explore continuing education and collaboration within the library or with other library facilities? Will it be used as a marketing tool for the library or for the institution? Other points to consider are location, provision of resources, and staffing.

Why should public (school, special etc.) libraries care about reaching the "gaming consumer"?

Grassian: Gaming of all kinds attracts users to public libraries. Second Life has a Teen Island and other areas for children, with restricted access. Games entice people to learn, and while Second Life is not a game, strictly speaking, it has gaming elements that would appeal to younger generations: modifiability, opportunities for creativity, and opportunities to profit from creativity, educational opportunities, risk-taking, and experimentation in an environment where you are physically safe.

Trueman: Why would we not care about reaching the "gaming consumer"? What is the future of librarianship if we don't reach out to current and future generations and provide for their information needs and interests? I don't think that reaching out to the "gaming consumer" is any different than reaching out to lovers of mysteries, fans of sci-fi, readers of romance or any other group of library users.

Should public libraries (or other types of libraries) come to Second Life? Why? Or, why not?

Opportunities for collaboration

Grassian: Yes, they should, and they already are... Opportunities and motivation for public libraries may be a bit different than for academic libraries. Book discussions and historical discussions come alive, literally, with avatars taking on the roles of historical figures like Henry VIII. Exhibits can be multi-dimensional and rotated to different locations within Second Life. Outreach to the virtual world population offers many opportunities to reach those who might never have thought about or entered a physical library. Business developers may find useful information and advice through public library offerings within Second Life. (Currently there are over 7000 businesses in Second Life.) There are additional opportunities for public libraries to reach other populations, including children and teens, in special protected areas of Second Life.

Trueman: Yes! I have met and worked with dozens of librarians from all types of libraries with whom I would have possibly never have had the opportunity to meet, much less the opportunity to share information.

Opportunities for global community

Trueman: Yes! It is astounding to see the network of librarians and libraries from many different countries that are connected through this project into one global

community. We are volunteering our time and expertise for a project we feel worthy of the effort.

Opportunities for personal connection
Trueman: Yes! Not only have I been able to connect with librarians from other institutions, I have made connections with librarians at different campuses within our own library system. Although we share the same curriculum and many of the same library positions, we may never meet face-to-face. Second Life provides an opportunity for us to gather and discuss issues, problems, and trends.

Opportunities for creativity and enterprise
Trueman: Yes! "Limitless possibilities" was the response of one library director upon viewing the world of Second Life for the first time, and it certainly is true. While not every type of material is available or even usable in Second Life, the opportunity for creating new ways of reaching users has a potential that we have just begun to explore.

Opportunities for learning and development
Trueman: Yes! The recent addition of the area for individual libraries (Cybrary City), with its conference center and "librarians' library" provides the perfect setting for continuing education and development.

Opportunities to extend our reach
Trueman: Yes! Robert Browning said, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp." ("Andrea del Sarto" (1855) I. 97) Second Life Library 2.0 is a grand experiment; no one is saying that it is the library of the future, but we who are participating in this project feel that is a worthy avenue to explore to reach out to users in new ways.

Grassian: All of the opportunities listed above apply to all types of libraries within Second Life, including special libraries, as corporations like Sun Microsystems are establishing virtual areas for their own users within Second Life, including access to their own research resources.

Corresponding author
Esther Grassian can be contacted at: estherg@library.ucla.edu