

Beyond Second Life: An Exploration of Real Libraries in Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

The presence of libraries in virtual worlds elicits many diverse reactions, ranging from excessive enthusiasm to absolute disapproval. Pulling together scholarship, corporate opinion, and popular literature, this poster incorporates the research and anecdotal evidence that shaped the presenters' depiction of libraries in virtual worlds. This includes, but is definitely not limited to, Second Life. This poster offers a broad view of the relationship between virtual worlds and libraries, and the realistic measures and risks that should be considered when libraries discuss their presence within a virtual world.

Introduction & Methods

As early career librarians, three of the authors of this study worked with the fourth, a library administrator, to investigate the ways that a virtual world might help our academic library accomplish our mission to serve our university community. We examined several virtual world platforms, including Second Life, with two goals in mind: the library services that we would want to develop in-world and the requirements for these services to be functional in each virtual environment. The authors collaboratively established the criteria by which each virtual world would be examined, and then individually evaluated each virtual world according to the criteria.

Results & Conclusions

Of the virtual worlds examined for this study, Second Life represented the most well-established virtual world. However, even Second Life failed to meet anticipated needs; the other two worlds—OpenLife Grid and Active Worlds—were too new and too restrictive to satisfy the established requirements for successful library adoption.

Virtual worlds are a relatively new technology; even though they have faded somewhat from the library community's collective fascination, they still represent new frontiers in digital communication. Because of this, the authors recommend that libraries interested in virtual worlds wait to see how these worlds develop.

Furthermore, the authors compiled a list of recommendations/changes in virtual worlds that would need to occur before the virtual world platform could effectively meet the needs of the library community.

Library Services	Pro/Con
Reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Pros</i> – 'face-to-face' interaction through avatars - 'visible' presence for the librarian - archive of transactions • <i>Cons</i> – high learning curve for using virtual worlds - limited college age patron base
Collection Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Pros</i> – 3-D nature of the interface enhances "browsing" - opportunity to display multimedia • <i>Cons</i> – Licensing restrictions limit access - very little content can actually be embedded in-world, most collection access is through links that take the user to an outside browser
Exhibits & Outreach	<p><i>Pros</i> - This is where virtual worlds really shine.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for exhibits, imagination (and possibly cost) are the only limiters • <i>Cons</i> – limited number of college age users, getting patrons in world to view exhibits may be difficult - upload costs and programming experience required
Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Pros</i> – Instruction sessions allow the students to 'see' both the instructor and the other students, fostering a feeling of connection • <i>Cons</i> - high learning curve for students - there is little virtual worlds can do for instruction that cannot be done with simpler tools

Virtual World Comparison

Second Life

- Has the largest potential patron base
 - Is the most expensive
- Has the most flexibility in what can be created in-world
- Exhibits substantial lag even on high-end computer systems
- Requires significant time investment to learn to build in-world

Active Worlds

- Cheaper than Second Life, but limits number of simultaneous users
- Limits the types of things one can build in-world: can only modify existing templates
- Has an entire section devoted to educational use
- Only premium (paid) members can search for and communicate privately with other users

Open Life Grid

- The only virtual world that allows users to own the content they have created
- Uses the same content-creating method as Second Life
- Is the cheapest of the three worlds examined

Future of Virtual Worlds

Second Life has been an extraordinary study of sociology and human behavior but the experiment is over. Virtual space does not yield a utopia and in order to survive, virtual worlds must make money. To this end, new worlds are emerging with new business plans and a focus on commercialism. However, what does not seem to be emerging is a large college age user group. Virtual Worlds geared towards children and teenagers are growing but they are not similar to the virtual worlds explored here. Perhaps libraries should stop and re-evaluate the type of worlds they engage in.

Recommendations

Wait for it. Virtual worlds are a remarkable new technology, however, in their current incarnation they do not seem to meet most of the needs of academic libraries. In order to truly meet those needs the following changes would need to be made:

- A web-based interface that does not require better than average hardware
- A start-up time of less than 1 hour including registration, download, and beginner tutorials.
- Easy and clear navigation with a searchable database of places and events that is easy to use.
- Standard landmarks (in-world bookmarks) for each user associated with the library site including the library site and in-world user tutorials.
- Sufficient bandwidth to allow media rich content and even partial access to the library collection.
- Ideally, an established population of college age users
- Libraries should be prepared to approach developers and get involved in the worlds at inception.

Risks

- Virtual worlds are commercial enterprises not educational entities.
- Virtual World users do not own their content although they may retain copyright in some worlds.
- Virtual World Providers reserve the right to remove content without reason or permission of the content creators.
- Users may engage in various in-world activities which may have a negative impact on your site and which may also make them vulnerable in the real world.
- Policing is limited in Virtual Worlds. Individuals and content creators must take extra precautions to protect themselves against ill-intentioned and hostile users.