

Chapter 7

Analysis of Initial Involvement of Librarians in the Online Virtual World of Second Life

Michelle Kowalsky
Rowan University, USA

ABSTRACT

This descriptive case study considers a tech-savvy and geographically distributed group of librarians and information professionals, led by an initiative of the Alliance Library System of Illinois, who gathered together to brainstorm and organize ways to provide online users with real library services. Through document analysis of written conversations in their online discussion group, the researcher has explored the development process of these librarians as they began to provide information services to users in the virtual online world of Second Life®.

DEVELOPING A PRESENCE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

A new age of participatory culture around virtual environments has apparently evolved, as users flock to whichever online platforms give them the kinds of immersive, interactive environments they desire (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). Users of the online virtual environment known as *Second Life*®, are able to contribute their own content, such as topography, buildings, interactive features and objects, to the simulated space they share with others. Linden Research, Inc., founder of Linden Lab and the provider of these online scripting tools for creating objects, did contribute much actual content of this kind to their virtual world at all. The company preferred to provide the mechanics of a grid of potential design space, and then to let the users decide what the world would look like and how they would interact with other users.

Several major decisions about virtual world design, then, need to be made by users of *Second Life*®, either individually or as a group. Academic librarians along with their education and technology colleagues decided to test the merits of this type of interactive environment for use in providing library services in a variety of library types. These decisions about areas of the world, known as islands, include various management, leadership, and design aspects such as the world's scope, ethos and culture, ap-

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proach to management of participant interaction, alignment of roles, scale, and the like (Bartle, 2004). Librarians thus aimed to develop a presence in this online world and to undertake a variety of tasks from visioning to daily operations. A thorough analysis of the archived conversations of the *Second Life*® librarians, as documented through their online discussion group, has enabled the field to review these aspects of development in terms of frequency, context and motion over the course of the first year of their planning process.

Development in a virtual world may go through a variety of stages as it takes shape, especially when the development process is negotiated by a diverse group of users with various goals. The librarians of *Second Life*® have thus discovered and shared many lessons and practices, as well as suggested and improved several system modifications, during the first year of their multi-year development process. The librarians of the Alliance Library System, and their national and international partners, eventually revised key elements to support improved social dynamics about and within the virtual space, and to utilize a virtual world successfully in the provision of library and information services. As they have learned, “the support of multi-user, real-time interactions, persistent places and people, and the ability for end users to author and contribute to dynamic, expressive interactions has proven valuable for developing sustainable virtual environments” (Cheng, Farnham & Stone, 2002, p. 109). This personalization, opportunity to learn and experiment, and cooperative work on an international scale is an important contribution to the fields of both librarianship and information communication technologies.

As Bartle (2004) explains, during the pre-production stage of an online world effort, which can last up to six months, a vision document and design ideas may be created and discussed. The librarians of *Second Life*® have documented their thoughts on pre-production, testing and roll-out over time via their electronic discussion list, an online Google™ discussion group with open enrollment. The group’s development, from visioning to building to opening of their *Second Life*® library and its many attendant islands and features, has been experienced from a variety of viewpoints among virtual participants from all over the United States and the world. This global conversation led to a rich discussion about the viability of new virtual services for providing information and assistance to library users and online patrons of many types.

Bartle’s roll-out stage is “the most critical phases of development, when all the technologies and assets created are brought together to form a virtual world experience” (2004, p. 90). A culminating event of the group’s first year of work -- the grand opening of the *Second Life*® librarians’ Information Island to the public, as well as its aftermath of publicity and critique -- was captured via this discussion group and marks a boundary of the case. The grand opening party for Information Island, which was so well attended at certain times of day that it helped to crash the *Second Life*® servers, is an example of the group’s self-reflective and analytical critique of their own work. Thus, the core team of librarians who led this initiative has experienced a variety of constructive and not-so constructive criticism about their initial foray into library services in *Second Life*®.

Lankes, Silverstein and Nicholson (2007) describe the potential for libraries as participatory conversations, and that “the library, as facilitator, needs to be varied in its modes and access points. In many cases, it is better to either create a personal space in which users may converse, or, increasingly, to be part of someone else’s space” (p. 31). The librarians in this group migrated toward *Second Life*® as a platform which would reach many of their users at their preferred point of connection and exploration, which is so often online. Thus, this initial analysis of the group’s strategy development, interaction processes, and decision-making sequences not only help us understand how they arrived at their present condition over the course of the initiative’s first year, but also may help others who are considering pursuit of a

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