

InfoTech Column
Due Feb. 20, 2007
Information Outlook, April 2007 Issue

Second Life and Special Libraries

By Stephen Abram

Second Life: *definition* – “Second Life is an open-ended virtual world created by San Francisco-based Linden Lab. It is similar to There, another such world created around the same time, in that one of its primary focuses is socialization, but the similarity ends there. The brain child of former RealNetworks CTO Philip Rosedale, Second Life gives its users (referred to as residents) tools to shape its world.” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life)

Avatars: *definition* – “A graphical representation of a real person in cyberspace.”

Please - none of the already stale jokes that you like your *first* life just fine. Not only is it an old joke (the internet has given humour a half life of about 20 minutes) but it implies folks are putting up barriers and missing the learning moment.

We're challenged in the present by the web, intranets, 2.0 technologies, and more every day! Now you're talking virtual worlds? What does this have to do with special library work? Lots! I've written about Web 3.0 once before in this column and pointed to the OpenCroquet project at MIT. It's worth look at http://www.opencroquet.org/index.php/Main_Page. This is what the world might look like if we follow the MS Windows route through Vista and beyond. That's only one evolutionary scenario. Another scenario is that we'll follow the gaming metaphor and build virtual worlds that mirror our real world – reducing the friction between human and machine. No one can tell you what's going to happen – but we can guess at what might happen. Science fiction seems to often become reality.

Either way, we'd be wise to keep our eyes open and aware. Change seems to happen so quickly lately. Anyway, I have been intrigued with virtual reality environments like Second Life (<http://www.secondlife.com>) and Active Worlds (<http://www.activeworlds.com/>) and There.com (<http://www.there.com/>) for quite a while (weeks really in Internet time!). I know I'm not alone.

You've likely heard the numbers. The most conservative estimates, as of January 2007, put Second Life as a pretty large virtual ecology. Over 1.2 million people have created avatars in Second Life. 1,525,670 unique people have logged into Second Life at least once and of that number, 252,284 people have logged in more than 30 days after their account creation date. The conservative *monthly* growth rate is about 23%. 23% growth will mean 3 million in a year's

time, a healthy number, but not hyperbolic growth. It can be managed and we can see the effects and react – unlike other web-based changes we've lived through.

We're in a new world where experimentation and exciting pilots are multiplying like Tribbles (non-Trekkies will just have to look this up!). Cool! Rad! Sweet! Hot! Cats Pajamas! Whatever your age, this is so engaging and interesting to an information profession that thrives on interesting.

I am writing this article after returning from the SLA Winter Meeting in Reno. There are now over 400 librarians in Second Life working on virtual library services on over 9 islands in Second Life. Info Island, the central library island with its multi-story tower, attracts 4000 visitors a day. Cybrary City, where the Australian Libraries Building is located, has 1000 visits per day. There are Edulands too. I know there are a few special librarians in Second Life. One SLA member, Jill Hurst-Wahl has even demonstrated SL on television, proving once again that SLA has some of the coolest members.

Libraries, of course, are not the only ones here. Dell Computer runs press conferences there. Indeed at least one press conference was only held in Second Life. Reuters has an island there. Even the venerable ALA Washington Office staff and their Chicago-based information maven, Jenny Levine, The Shifted Librarian, can be found there. Many of the familiar names of leading librarians can be found underneath their Second Life avatar identities. Libraries and librarians from around the world, including folks in Canada, Australia and Europe are there.

Several people have asked me if Second Life libraries are much of a development. One said they just didn't 'get it'. I know it's not age, because I'm getting up there and I get it. I didn't have a great answer at the time but it gave me the impetus to write this column. It's about the experience. It's about learning by doing. It's harder to get Second Life in the abstract – much like it was difficult to explain what the Web and Internet were going to be in the early days. Remember 1994 when someone tried to explain the web, gopher, Archie, html, etc. to us? I didn't find it easy to 'get' it right away. I had to play with the technology a while to finally get it – mostly.

In SL, there is a group called Special Librarians of Second Life which is described as "a meeting place for Special Librarians offering services in Second Life." There is also a special librarian's office in Cybrary City (location coordinates 57, 152, 25). For more information on the group and the office, contact Rosmairta Kilara in Second Life (avatar's name). In her real life, Rosmairta (Rowan) is a special librarian and patent searcher. Special Librarians of Second Life is not associated with SLA or another library association. As often happens in Second Life, groups are formed by people of like interests coming together no matter their real world affiliations.

http://sla-divisions.typepad.com/itbloggingsection/2007/01/special_librari.html

And in a tip of the hat to what's normally a very hidebound bureaucratic environment, the government of Sweden plans to open a real embassy on Second Life. No passports are available, but you can get info on how to get one, etc. See <http://www.thelocal.se/6219/20070126/>.

Why is Second Life Library 2.0 Important?

I always have my antennae up to sense trends in the information and library worlds. So when I see people flocking to environments and events like Second Life I sense that something significant is afoot. Can you do everything a library does, including books, in Second Life? So far, and this is an incomplete A-Z list, we haven't hit a boundary that says you can't do anything in Second Life that you can do in a real physical/virtual library. These are the following things that are already there, in Library 2.0:

- a. A Science Center
 - b. A Health Information Island
 - c. A Medical Library
 - d. Search databases like PubMed
 - e. Art Galleries and Museums
 - f. An Engineering Library
 - g. Book Talks
 - h. Authors as visitors and as events
 - i. Publishers
 - j. A Mystery Castle
 - k. A Science Fiction and Fantasy Collection
 - l. Information Literacy and library research skills classes
 - m. A huge Theater
 - n. Training and education spaces
 - o. A Walk-in Book
 - p. Games
 - q. Search databases like PubMed
 - r. TechSoup
 - s. Educational courses
 - t. OCLC Database trials
 - u. Politicians and debates
 - v. Programming parties
 - w. Wine and Cheese parties (yep – virtual food)
 - x. Artists discussions, with books and art
 - y. Chats with fellow patrons, locally and globally
- And even . . .
- z. Books and magazines!
- Sounds like a library to me!

Where do I look to find out more?

Second Life (started in 2003 by Linden Labs)

<http://secondlife.com/>

Teen Second Life

<http://teen.secondlife.com/>

Info Island Blog

<http://infoisland.org/>

Eye4YouAlliance Blog

<http://eye4youalliance.youthtech.info/>

M2-Metaverse Messenger (The Second Life Newspaper)

<http://www.metaversemessenger.com/>

Second Life Library Flickr Group (See screenshots)

<http://del.icio.us/secondlifelibrary>

Second Life Library Del.icio.us links (find articles and sites)

<http://flickr.com/groups/secondlifelibrary>

Second Life Library in MySpace

<http://www.myspace.com/infoisland>

Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County

<http://plcmc.org/>

Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County Teens

<http://plcmc.org/teens/secondlife.asp>

Alliance Library System

<http://alliancelibrarysystem.com/>

You can see articles, screenshots, ideas, commentary in the above links. You can even sign up for free, build or borrow an avatar, and get into Second Life. Learn by playing! Recent *School Library Journal* and *Computers in Libraries* issues have cover stories on Second Life. Give it a try. It might not be right for you but you'll have an informed opinion very quickly.

SirsiDynix is so intrigued by Second Life that we've taken to sponsoring a few of the islands including the Alliance Library Systems Library 2.0 and the Alliance Library System/Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County partnership project on Teen Second Life which is named "Eye4YouAlliance." The purpose of the Second Life Library 2.0 is to provide real library services to Second Life

residents. The goal of Eye4You Alliance is to create a safe, interactive and informative space for young adults within the Teen Second Life virtual world and to collaborate with other educators who serve youth and are already present in Teen Second Life and in real life.



Caption: This screenshot shows Squid Cagney (a.k.a. Stephen Abram) taking a tour of Second Life Library 2.0 with BlueWings Hayek (Kelly Czarnecki Teen Librarian at ImaginOn Library Loft of the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenberg County). Says Stephen, “It’s great to have hair again in my Second Life.”

Each library offers tours and events within their virtual presences. They have been incredibly generous with the global library community in sharing their knowledge. The SirsiDynix Institute offered a session in April 2007 which was a tour of Second Life Library 2.0. This has been archived as a webcast and is available as a podcast too through iTunes. You can find it here: <http://www.sirsidynixinstitute.com> and view it at your leisure.

So, here we are on the cusp of a third presence for all types of libraries – special libraries included. We have our physical presence, we have our virtual presence as a website/intranet, and now we can have a second life in our virtual worlds.

The initial creativity seems boundless. As I take my ‘noob’ (newbie) self through Second Life I am feeling the same thing I felt when I put my first website up in late 1994. It’s a combination of excitement, play, a sense of adventure and a burgeoning feeling that I am seeing the future again.

So, build yourself an avatar and learn to play again. It's going to be a sweet ride!
Meet me (My Name is **Squid Cagney**) there.

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