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Reflections in Wonderland

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INTRODUCTION

Second Life (SL) is a 3D virtual world created by Linden Research Inc. in 2003. It now has over 10 million resident avatars and its own currency, the Linden dollar. Library activity there includes the Info Islands archipelago where there are re-creations of many US and some UK libraries. Some educational institutions have also bought their own islands.

Our explorations of SL were undertaken as one part of a project looking at the library's use of Moodle, the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) and the longer-term possibilities offered by SL and other 3D virtual worlds. We also want to explore the possibilities offered by linking Moodle and SL via the mash-up, Sloodle.

Our reflections go back over the last year to March 2007 when our second lives began.

LEARNING TO FLY AND OTHER NEW SKILLS

In accessing SL from work we initially encountered IT barriers but, thanks to helpful colleagues, these were overcome. The first barrier we encountered was that the university firewall blocked access completely, and this had to be reconfigured to allow the project staff access. We then found that, although we had access, we were unable to teleport. We sent an unlikely looking e-mail request to an IT colleague for 'help with teleporting please!' that very promptly led to a

further tweak to the firewall. Access has now been extended to all university staff.

On first exploring SL we discovered that some considerable skills development was required for us to feel confident in living and working in a virtual world. Apparently simple things such as creating and dressing your avatar, moving around (which can be done by walking, flying and teleporting), climbing stairs and even sitting down can all be problematic, and it's not possible to participate fully until these skills are developed.

This can make early experiences of SL particularly frustrating.

In addition, there are also further higher-level skills involved in taking part in social interactions in a virtual world and adjustments that have to be made in expectations. Some real-life social norms carry over – for example, not sitting or standing too close to another avatar – but in other ways SL has different norms. Various factors tend to have a disinhibiting effect on behaviour: the relative anonymity, the lack of physical risk, the ability to easily alter your avatar's appearance and gender and the 'new frontier' atmosphere.

For 'Wynne' the initial orientation was made a little easier due to her typist's previous experience of text-based virtual worlds. This began with a visit to IPL Moo – part of the internet public library at the University of Michigan, and one of the first virtual reference services – as long ago as 1997. She also has experience of 3D adventure games such as *Zork* and *Myst*, and the skills learned in these have proved to be largely transferable. As another way of developing skills she found it useful to create a second avatar or 'alt' with which to explore the more social and playful aspects of SL.

'Merry's typist's prior experience was totally different, consisting of only a few visits to the Church of Fools – a 3D virtual church sponsored by the Methodist Church which was open from May until September 2004 – before joining the SL community. The initial orientation phase has therefore taken much longer for her and may still be continuing.

We have realised that we cannot fix a definite time scale of how long it takes to become orientated within SL. For 'Wynne' there were fewer new skills to learn. For 'Merry', it felt that it took forever before moving became more natural – sitting

down, in particular, and landing gracefully after flying have proved difficult skills to conquer.

WHAT CAN WE DO IN HERE?

On exploring SL we found that our preconceptions about what we might do in there soon had to be revised. Initially, we had assumed that we would want to create a library building, a virtual equivalent of our physical library building, possibly with certain added extra features along the lines of the alternative library developed by one of the authors in partnership with a colleague in 2000.¹ Our experience has led us to reconsider whether this would be the most appropriate way to go. Simply creating a building and adding content to it would not, we feel, be making full use of the potential of this new world, and it may not even be necessary.

It may, though, have potential as a 'safe' way for those who suffer from library anxiety to explore the library building in SL and so become used to the actual university library before dealing with it in reality. This may be important to some students. In the book *Alter ego: avatars and their creators*,² a student is quoted as saying that 'The barrier of not being face-to-face with people helped', and we need to be aware of this.

It might be possible to combine these approaches by creating the frontage of the building so that those who have visited it in SL will recognise the same building in the real world and feel more confident in entering it. While the inside of the building need not exactly mirror the real-life building, it would be possible to create an approximation of where the different areas of the library are, without the physical world's constraints such as doors and stairs.

The elements we have found to be vital to success in SL are the presence of people, interactive events and real-time synchronous communication. Fundamentally it is a social space, a place where people meet. We have observed a tendency for people to gravitate to other people, rather than to places or to information points.

The reference desk on Info Island acts especially as a focal point for librarians, attracting quite a crowd at times (usually in the afternoon and evening because of the number of US librarians who are actively involved) and this seems to be because it is out in the open and regularly staffed. Many of the more impressive library buildings – most of which have content but no staff, or staff-

ing only at limited times – attract only occasional, usually lone visitors, unless there is an event or exhibition.

While exploring alone helps with the practical skills of moving around, the opportunity to network with other librarians and the subsequent exchange of ideas is one of the main benefits of SL to us so far. Without meeting others and socializing, it is not easy to see all the possibilities provided by virtual worlds. Talking and sparking ideas off each other has been fun and informative.

Taking part in courses and attending meetings in SL gave us further opportunities to observe how learning and teaching operate there. In 2007 we took part in two online courses on 'Librarianship in virtual worlds' provided by the University of Illinois. These courses comprised six-weekly two-hour classes, each held in SL, along with VLE facilities provided via Moodle. This gave us the opportunity to experience being students in a virtual world and VLE, as well as providing valuable course material on how SL is being used by libraries and educators.

Attending classes in SL and taking part in the course via Moodle were very different experiences. The SL classes were intense and immersive, particularly when they involved visits to exhibits or manipulation of virtual objects, and discussions by course members were lively and wide-ranging in class sessions, much more so than in-between classes in the online forums. It was much harder to arrive late for a class or leave it early than it was to log in and out of a forum and the fact that you have a visible presence in SL makes it difficult to lurk and take no active part, as so many people do in online chat sessions and discussion forums. It was also necessary to pay attention in class because the avatars slump their head and shoulders after a certain period of inactivity, giving a clear visual signal of their typists' attentiveness, or lack of it!

Using the VLE in conjunction with the SL class gave an opportunity to look back on the class discussion and to ask questions again afterwards. While we were in SL at the same time as others on the course, we never 'chatted' in real time with anyone in the VLE, owing to the different real-world time-zones.

It was interesting that neither element would have been complete without the other and each added a different perspective to the learning that took place within each course.

IS SECOND LIFE THE WAY FORWARD?

The often frustrating nature of the SL interface is evident to all who take part in it. Even experienced residents find there is a comic tendency to bump into things and other avatars, and to sit in inappropriate places. Ad Agency DRAFTFCB caught the look and feel of the SL imperfections perfectly in its video, available via YouTube.³

With all its limitations, however, SL is currently the most successful virtual world in terms of both the numbers of people taking part and of the high-profile organizations, such as IBM and Reuters, that are establishing a presence in-world. When we checked on 5 March 2008 we found that 1,347,560 avatars had been active in SL during the last 60 days. Given the social nature of virtual worlds, and the fact that participation can help to develop skills that are transferable to other virtual worlds, it seems to be the place to be at the moment.

While SL may not be the perfect platform in the long term, the general trend of online activity is towards real-time connection and social interaction. With the growth of social networking and integrated Web 2.0 applications we increasingly go online in order to make contact with others and interact with them.

A recent report by the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research suggests that students are spending more time working online in this type of virtual social space than visiting either physical library buildings or traditional library websites,⁴ and we need to find ways to be present in this new type of online world and to develop the skills appropriate to working within it.

NEXT STEPS

University courses are increasingly delivered in a blended-learning mode, with more use being made of the various facilities offered by the VLE, and it may be possible to integrate virtual worlds into this, for example by means of the Sloodle mash-up between Moodle and SL.

What virtual worlds have to offer here is a sense of presence, as described by Lombard and Ditton in their paper 'At the heart of it all: the concept of presence',⁵ which notes that it is a key factor in student engagement with online learning, both in terms of telepresence – being there – and of social presence – being there with others. This could

change the experience of blended or distance learning from one where learners and teachers can sometimes feel disconnected and isolated from one another to one of being involved in an active online learning community.

In the remaining time our project has to run we would like to develop some kind of library presence in SL, although we are as yet unsure of exactly what form this should take. Staff and students in the university are just beginning to experiment with SL and we would hope to have a visible presence there, as we do on the real-world campus.

Just as a VLE is, or can be, much more than a repository for lecture notes, a virtual world has the potential to be much more than a three-dimensional version of a website, but exactly what we do in there is something that can only develop through experiment and experience and in collaboration with the academic staff within our own university and with other librarians worldwide.

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