

BUILDING COMMUNITY AS A LIBRARY IN A 3D ENVIRONMENT

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It is predicted in a recent report by Gartner Inc that '80% of active internet users will be in a virtual world by the end of 2011'. This is a prediction that public libraries should pay attention to, not only in terms of the technical side – what hardware and software is needed to upgrade computers or other equipment such as video cards – but as information specialists, how can they be a resource for users of virtual worlds and why would they want to be? Described is the experience and outcome of a library purchasing an island on Teen Second Life. Revision of a presentation at the Queensland Public Libraries Association conference Ipswich Qld September 2007.

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- parents might want to know how safety factors into the different sites
- youth and teens might need some direction on being savvy consumers in virtual worlds since many are based on an economy
- users might appreciate librarians being inworld with them as resources and guides for the environment itself and building a community with educational resources for our users and beyond in this global environment.

Teen Second Life

In 2006 the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) in North Carolina entered into a partnership with the Alliance Library System in Illinois to purchase an island on Teen Second Life teen.secondlife.com – a multiuser virtual environment (Muve). This allows participants to communicate through text or voice and work together with their avatars to create their own environment. Muves have been in existence since the 1970s, Second Life since 2003, and Teen Second Life since 2005.

This particular Muve was chosen because of the profound ability to collaborate with others and the amount of control and creativity over one's environment. Collaborating in this environment is different than some other virtual worlds because you can share photos and documents

without ever 'leaving' the world. Text and voice chat are ways that people can communicate. There also is no advertising in Teen Second Life, which was an attraction.

To purchase an island on Teen Second Life (TSL) involves real currency. Sometimes it might seem strange to spend real money on something not real but what one is purchasing basically is server space, processing speed, and the maintenance of this hardware by Linden Lab, the company that is the creator of Second Life. Each island on the grid is the equivalent of one server. It is similar to buying a website domain name. Educators get a significant discount for the initial island purchase as well as on the monthly fees. Typically, partnerships are formed which can help offset those costs where people will rent plots of 'land' out to others at a reduced fee.

All adults in Teen Second Life, must pass a background check – criminal, sexual offender, and social security – before they are allowed access to the island. Once they pass and are given access, they are not allowed to leave the island and visit other islands on the teen grid – they are locked to that island. This level of security was attractive to the library as well, and we felt could serve as a role model for positive teen and adult interaction online. Linden Lab is working on building an all ages area so that teens can interact with their parents on the main grid. The details of how this will work remain to be seen, but they are in the making.

One of the main missions of Eye4You Alliance, the name of the island or sim in TSL owned by the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County has always been to have it teen driven. If teens take ownership of their virtual space, similarly to the way that a teen advisory group may give input into the construction and development of a bricks and mortar library teen

area, they will want to use the space more as well as develop leadership and negotiation skills. Some of the main ways the virtual space is, and has been, teen driven, are the roles given to teens. Estate managers have access to giving others rights to build on the land, delete objects, or ban people from the estate. These roles are somewhat similar to hall monitors in schools and are given to teens that have earned trust and contributed a lot of time to the island, and that work well with others. Estate managers are replaced from time to time if they leave the island for turning 18 years of age or because they are not able to spend enough time on the island.

Educators and librarians always get teen input when organizing events, programs, or ideas. For example the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) held meetings to get teen input on how space exploration can be expressed on the island. Teens also run their own meetings and events.

Library services in a 3D virtual space

Our second goal in having an island on TSL is to explore library services and what that means in a 3D virtual space. Library services have always been, and should be, the centre of a community not only in being knowledgeable about how the community works but also by bringing the community together by inviting partners into the library to give programs and share knowledge.

This kind of model works similarly in 3D environments as well, particularly TSL. For example there might be a teen author coming out with a new book that would agree to give a presentation on the island to the teens. There might be teens using your library that have a real interest in space and science. Nasa has a presence in Teen Second Life where it can interact with young people and give presentations about various concepts, even video stream a landing of the shuttle where teen from all over the world can watch at the same time.

Other virtual worlds for teens such as GaiaOnline www.gaiaonline.com work with companies to bring in singers or entertainers where, again, teens can interact with or view a performance of a virtual concert. These programs are not the same as, and are not meant to replace, meeting in person. However, if you have no other access to Nasa but to go on to its

website and view the content, being able to interact with it in a virtual world is a great way to have access. By participating, the library is able to bring a community together – especially if teens come to the library to access the computers for this interaction and then create their own conversation around their shared experiences.

Reference services

Another service we usually expect or equate with libraries is a reference desk or some type of roving reference where librarians are called upon to consult resources they are trained in using to help the user. We do not sit at a virtual reference desk, and not all adults are librarians on the island. There is, however, a reference service and desk that is much used on what is called the main grid (mg) of Second Life. This is for those 18 years and over, and is organised by a library system. This is not to say that a reference model will not work in TSL, although it will not do so in the same way it does in real life or on the mg of Second Life.

Some similar models of how it has worked on TSL is that people will hold office hours. The specialties of people might be limited to one subject. They have not necessarily been trained like a librarian to look up information – but they are there as an information resource if a teen is interested in the particular topic they are there to discuss, such as college recruiting or creating films. Reference instruction occurs but it is quite informal and might happen through conversations on the island. For example a teen and librarian might be discussing a topic on the island and a resource at hand is consulted. The librarian might point out to the teen where that information came from, if they are able to use a similar resource. Real time cobrowsing ie where the librarian is looking at something on the internet that the teen can see at the same time, has not been done yet on Eye4You Alliance. However, as soon as html can be imported on a prim (being a basic building block of Second Life and html imported meaning one does not have to ‘exit’ Second Life to visit a website – they can both remain on the island and look at a website), it will open many options for interacting with teens when doing reference, whether formally or informally. Photos and urls to sites can be easily shared without leaving the world. Since TSL has a global reach, databases could not necessarily be accessed by all anyway, and teens do not necessarily share nor are asked where they are from.

So whether or not they have access to a particular database might not be known, but a general awareness of it could take place. The reference model that exists on Eye4You is not one that is the same across the board on TSL. Many islands on the teen grid are owned and run by schools. This is a different model from Eye4You Alliance – somewhat like the difference between a school and public library in the sense that the resources in the school library would be tied more to the curriculum and the public library would support that but is more a place for informal learning. Allowing collaboration to happen between the teens by creating opportunities for them to work on projects is also how information is built on the island. Teens are great resources for each other. They might not consult a library database but their resources extend beyond just typing in Google. It becomes shared knowledge because they rely on each other for questions and answers, usually around skills in Second Life, but often around projects they are working on that have real life applicability.

Skills for the 21st century

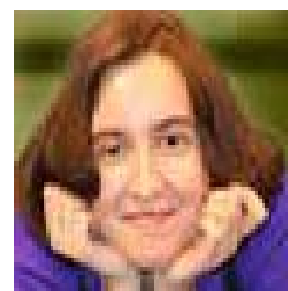
We are creating a community with and for teens, and helping them develop skills for the 21st century. One of the ways in which information literacy can be learned and expressed in Second Life is through machinima. ‘Machinima’ is a combination of ‘machine’ and ‘cinema’. It lends itself to creating stories through movie making with the built in browser or use of third party editing and capturing applications to create a product. Teaching teens how to communicate in a variety of formats is an important skill for them and is built right into Second Life. One of the librarians on the island, HVX Silverstar, led a machinima weekend, teaching teens tools to storyboard, capture the screen, and edit. The teens are currently designing a medieval village as the backdrop for a film they want to shoot.

Scripting, or using the programming code of Second Life, called LSL or Linden Scripting Language – which is similar to C++ and involves algebra skills – is also an important part and coveted skill of bringing objects to life in 3D. One recent project on the library’s island that involved scripting as an information literacy tool is the library fine paying machine. This machine was programmed to accept library card numbers from users who would type it in, give them their balance in Lindens (the virtual currency of Second Life) and US dollars. Teens worked together to figure out how to develop this product. They had to determine what information was needed when a person typed their card into the machine as well as what was needed as part of the programming language to make this work. Next, they needed to develop a search strategy – in other words, how could they program the machine to connect with the card number and identify what the user owed? They figured out how to do this by having just the url that is available to the public – that fines can be paid online. While the payment itself does not directly erase the fines from the database, it has to be manually done. It shows that teens are eager and interested to solve a puzzle when presented to them, and it is still cool, even though it relates to a library – which might be thought of as an uncool place by teens.

Eye4You continues to grow with new teens and adults increasingly wanting to be involved all the time. Activity outside of the island through other social networking tools such as blogs <http://eye4youalliance.youthtech.info>, and Flickr <http://www.flickr.com/photos/eye4you>, is also a community that is created as a result of the project and engages teens in reading/writing as well.

For an overview of involvement in Teen Second Life, visit the wiki <http://tinyurl.com/shcey>. It is a very rewarding experience for both adults and teens.

Kelly Czarnecki has masters degrees in library and information science, educational policy studies, and a BA in rhetoric. She has had extensive library and teaching experience since 2001, and has held positions as young adult librarian at Bloomington Public Library 2002-2005, teen librarian at Charlotte & Mecklenburg County Public Library 2006, and has been its technology education librarian since January 2007. In September 2007 Kelly was a keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Queensland Public Libraries Association in Ipswich. Address: 9248 N Vicksburg Park Court Charlotte NC 28219 USA email kczarnecki@plcmc.org



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