Virtual Worlds: Libraries in Second Life during COVID 19 and Post COVID 19

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Abstract
In early March 2020, COVID-19 blindsided the glove academic libraries included; now occurring reopening campuses, academic libraries face a paradigm shift. Instead of returning to normal, librarians will be returning to a "new normal". Virtual worlds like Second Life are becoming important tools for, among other activities, socialization, social networking, entertainment, collaboration, business development and library services during and after the pandemic. The Second Life platform was created and released on 23rd of June 2003 by Linden Lab a company founded by Philip Rosedale as a vehicle for individuals to create a computer generated alter ego (an avatar) to explore, learn, and live in communities much like their real life counterparts. The platform gained popularity as people swarmed to participate in a new of social connection. As Second Life gained in popularity, some librarians saw this as an opportunity to reach out to a growing cyber community by providing virtual reference service, conferences, workshops and classes. This paper discusses some library and information services that can be provided through virtual worlds such as Second Life and some job skills needed by Virtual World Librarians especially during and post covid 19 era. The study shows how libraries in developed countries adopt second life as a tool in reference and current awareness services, as well as reveal some challenges faced by librarians in providing information services in Second Life.

Keywords: Virtual worlds, Libraries, Librarians, Coronavirus, COVID 19.

Introduction

If the coronavirus crisis has taught us anything, it's how irrelevant our circulating print collections have become. Overnight, most libraries eliminated access due to concerns of virus spread. Strangely, requests for these materials were minimal. How can we make the content in our print collections more accessible and relevant in a post-COVID-19 world? Educators and librarians have been exploring Second Life, a 3D virtual world. With more and more users in virtual worlds, educators and librarians need to keep themselves informed about the ways these

platforms can be useful. Librarians involved in Second Life are experimenting with services and activities to discover the best way to use virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are becoming a familiar and favoured environment for many users. The Association of Virtual Worlds (2008)

Virtual worlds are increasingly evolving into Internet-mediated "spaces", where large groups of People meet and interact in real-time while experiencing a shared sensation of being there together Victoria P., & Eileen D., (2012). This enables richer and more dynamic social interaction and collaboration across national and cultural boundaries over the Internet compared to other traditional ICT-based collaboration environments (including web 1.0 and 2.0 platforms such as websites, wikis, blogs and even social networking sites). Many virtual worlds also empower users to create virtual items (User Created Content, UCC) in collaboration and to exchange these virtual assets for virtual or real-life currencies.

Corona virus (Covid-19)

Corona virus or Covid-19 is a novel virus identified on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei city of China.(WHO,2020). The virus is highly contagious and has a death rate that is multiple times higher than the one of seasonal flu, fever, a dry cough, shortness of breath, and extreme tiredness. It is a global pandemic spread within a short time. The virus affected several countries around the world including Nigeria. As a reaction to this outbreak, WHO (2020) recommended social distancing, lockdown and isolation or quarantine to fight the pandemic. Because of this sudden disaster, life has changed drastically overnight. All educational institutes, schools, and universities are closed, Due to this crucial situation, all activities of human life are hold-on because of human safety and benefits. During this lockdown, educational institutes all over the world are adapting distance learning methods and shifting towards online courses. Nigeria being a developing country also trying to adapt distance learning methods to move all the work and educational system to an online system. In this Scenario, University libraries play a vital role and provide better services to their users and access to deliver to the online reliable information and educational guidance during this pandemic crisis. In developing countries specially Nigeria library professionals known as traditional gatekeepers of knowledge are mostly not familiar with the latest information technology, they need to rebuild their profession, however by adopting ICT skills especially a 3- D virtual world like second life for reference and current awareness services.

Second Life

As information professionals, it is so important to be familiar with emerging trends like virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are more than just a fad. A recent Gartner

report indicates that 80% of Internet users will have a virtual world presence by 2011.Second Life is one popular example of a 3-D virtual world. Launched in 2003 by Linden Labs, Second Life is unique as it is entirely user-built. Everything you see in Second Life is built by its users, or "residents." There are over one million residents in Second Life, though usually tens of thousands are logged in at a given time. What are they all doing? In Second Life, you can basically do anything you can do in real life—make friends, attend classes, start a business, have a home, go dancing—pretty much anything you can imagine. Cities in Second Life are much like real life in that you can go to malls, galleries, libraries, clubs—again, pretty much like real cities. In addition to the day-to-day and ordinary aspects of life, the more compelling is possible. Flying around is common place, and teleporting is the way to travel from one location to another.

The purpose of Second Life is largely for social interaction. Second Life is not a game, as there is no ultimate goal. Second Life is fun and a lot of people use it for fun. But Second Life is increasingly being used for educational purposes, whether attending conferences, holding class sessions, or creating interactive exhibits Association of Virtual Worlds, (2008). The possibilities for education or communication are huge. Second Life is a new way to interact with information, with the potential to revolutionize the way we access information as dramatically as the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Second Life is the 3-D web. It is a new platform for communicating information. For this Second Life will be of great importance during Covid 19 and post Covid 19 Pandemic.
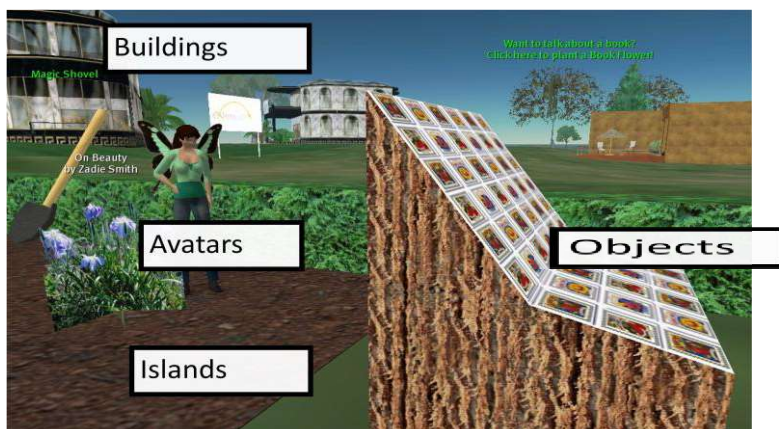

Fig 1: Second Life Interface

Libraries in Second Life

The Second Life virtual world is the most well known virtual platform and as it celebrates ten years of public access, many librarians, educators, gamers, role

players, and other Second Life residents are evaluating their experiences in Second Life along with other worlds. Second Life's longevity and its economy, in which you can purchase or acquire an astounding variety of goods and services developed by residents, make it the virtual world where many people begin their virtual experiences and come together to meet and share experiences, training, and insights into developing other places.

Librarians in the developed countries have been active in Second Life since 2006 and remain active in developing creative environments for lifelong teaching and learning. Among the earliest adopters for educational use of virtual worlds are librarians and information literacy specialists they began building and sharing resources by 2007. The potential for teaching across the curriculum and for reaching disabled patrons through this new medium was heralded as an important breakthrough in innovative technology. Research on the adoption of virtual world tools, techniques, and effectiveness has advanced the understanding of virtual and immersive spaces. Tools that are useful for immersive learning, delivery of 3-D content, and global collaboration for educators and librarians were identified through exploration of Second Life. Libraries also see great potential to link information and knowledge within virtual worlds without geographic boundaries and to attract the current generation of young people to use library services more readily.

Fig. 2: An example of Library Building

What are librarians doing with this new technology? A lot of the same kinds of things we do in real life, including:
• Reference services
• Collection Development
• Continuing Education
• International Collaboration

A lot of the librarian activity in Second Life is affiliated with the Second Life Library 2.0 project, organized by the Alliance Library consortium in Illinois in 2006. Info Island, which is the main Second Life location for this group, is now a cluster of several islands, many devoted to some particular aspect of librarianship, e.g., Health Info Island.

Reference is a major activity of the librarians participating in the Second Life Library 2.0 project. Info Island has become known as a good place for new users to get help. But as information resources are brought into this environment, Second Life may become a place to get other kinds of help as well.

There are two types of virtual reference: synchronous and asynchronous. In synchronous reference the patron inquiries are resolved in real time—a labour intensive activity requiring a dedicated staff. The most familiar examples of this type of service are OCLC's Question Point, telephone reference, live chat and instant messaging (IM).

Asynchronous reference depends primarily on email, web forms, or discussion/bulletin boards maintained by the library on their web site. A well thought out form can make this method less labour intensive for the library staff than synchronous reference, but may not be as satisfying for the patron who may want or need the information immediately.

Fig. 3: An example of reference desk

Books and information resources are incorporated in a variety of ways in Second Life. One of the more time-consuming but fun options is a flip book composed of page images. Pages turn as an avatar touches the object. Image uploads cost a few cents per image to create, and can be slow to load. These objects are image-based, so not searchable and users can't copy text from them. But they look cool and they're easy to create. Permissions can be set so the object can be copied, allowing a visitor can take it with them.

Fig 4: An example of flipbook

Another option for conveying information is to embed a "note card" in an object, so that when an avatar touches the object the notecard is delivered to them. Notecards are text based and can also be retained in the user's inventory.

Another common option for delivering information is to create a slideshow object. This is similar to the flip books, but not as fancy. A flat object changes images as it is touched. This is a common way to do presentations in SL, although some users consider it boring. One fun and useful type of information resource is called a Hud or a "heads up display". This is an object that is worn by an avatar and presents some kind of personalized information. For example, Virtual Morocco in Second Life uses an "InfoFez" which is essentially a tour guide of the site. The avatar obtains a fez from a kiosk and wears it while exploring the site. As you walk through the virtual marketplace the fez provides information about the location.

Fig. 5: For example, Virtual Morocco in Second Life uses an "InfoFez" which is essentially a tour guide of the site. The avatar obtains a fez from a kiosk and wears it while exploring the site. As you walk through the virtual marketplace the fez provides information about the location.

Another common way to bring content into Second Life is to use web links. Objects can be scripted to link our to an external web browser. This is an easy way to bring a lot of available content to a visitor in Second Life, but you leave the immersive environment. So it is not preferred but is useful, especially in the early days of virtual world technology. Librarians, programmers and others are working to make the book experience in Second Life more functional and immersive. One project under development is a Hud that looks like a book but grabs content dynamically from a database. So it is like the flip book objects, but works with a database back-end. These objects can grab images and text dynamically, making it more flexible and functional. One popular library vendor is currently talking with a group of librarians affiliated with the Alliance library group about how to bring content from one of their databases into Second Life in this kind of way. They are particularly interested in having the content available within the environment, rather than linking out to the web. The project represents the kind of library development currently going on in Second Life.

Challenges for Second Life Libraries

Some of the major challenges for Second Life Library currently are:
i. Staffing

A remarkable number of talented volunteers from around the world have contributed their talents and expertise in different ways, from collection development to reference and exhibit building. But still no librarian on duty 24/7.As with many volunteer-run organizations, there is some burnout. Other things such as real life and real jobs, take precedence over a volunteer job in a virtual world. In general, volunteer librarian-avatars respond very positively to the creative freedom they experience in Second Life.

Example: Reference

Reference Services are possible in virtual environments because they are equipped for communication between users. However, a successful reference service requires trained staff, defined in-world staff hours, and an understanding that the majority of users will be new to virtual worlds and may need technical help rather than library information. The success of in-world staffed ser-vices such as reference are influenced by pre-existing traffic to the virtual world site coupled with the ability to draw new users in-world. Finally, bandwidth and licensing restrictions limit the quality of reference interviews because the librarian may be unable to show the user the library OPAC or databases in real time. For these reasons, staffed reference services are not advantageous in virtual world settings.

ii.   Funding

Real life libraries are primarily funded from a local tax base - and therefore libraries on Second Life, with its' global reach, may have difficulty obtaining funding for a project or for paying staff. However, funds for specific projects have come from private sources, such as the American Library Association, Alliance Library System, Colorado Association of Libraries, and large foundations. Most librarians in Second Life have a real passion for the virtual work that they do, and donate much of their Second Life work time.

iii.   System Requirements

 Second Life and its system requirements create a wider gulf between those who own faster, more powerful computers with high speed broadband Internet, and the disenfranchised. As more and more libraries in real life upgrade their Public Access Computers, this divide is lessening

iv.   Collection Access

It is possible to link a library catalog in-world; however, the links may cost money and require substantial maintenance. Additionally, libraries must forget about access to subscription databases because of licensing restrictions. Some libraries have created actual library buildings within Second Life in order to serve patrons in-world. While some of these buildings are visually impressive, the content they provide rarely goes beyond objects that link to external web pages, such as a computer terminal one can sit at but which, when clicked, simply opens the library's home-page in another browser window. It does not seem practical to make the effort when most patrons will look for the website before looking for the virtual world site. Ultimately, these types of re-creations do not serve the purpose of interesting a library's traditional patrons in virtual worlds.

v.   Experts

Another limitation and challenge for the adoption of virtual worlds is the lack of librarians with skills and knowledge in how to use virtual worlds for library purposes. This may also be linked to the still limited understanding of the impact of virtual worlds on Library, suggesting an overall need for more qualitative and quantitative research in this specific area.

vi.   Interface

There is a steep and long learning curve in Second Life. One has to set aside a deal of time to learn how to move and participate. The control scheme for Second Life combines controls useful for 3D editing with those useful for game play, which can

be highly unintuitive for many. This requires various combinations of alt, ctrl, and the mouse for basic manipulation of the camera and in-world objects. Also, everything in the player's possession—textures, animations, objects, clothing, sounds, videos—shares a common directory tree, and can quickly become cluttered if not carefully managed.

vii.   Another challenge is determining what services virtual world residents want. Currently, exhibits and events are the most popular Library services used by residents.

Job Skills for Virtual World Librarians

Some traditional librarian skills pertain to job skills for Second Life libraries. Working in a virtual library opens up more flexible schedules and encourages working from home. Some information professionals do not have the self-discipline or interest to work from home, but many do. Reference is similar, in that whether librarians are in the virtual or in the real world; they must be able to multitask well, with patrons or avatars, in person, on live chat, or through instant messaging. In the real world, librarians also have to answer phone calls. A sense of humor is required, as is the ability to be ready for anything. Outlandish behavior seems to happen with greater frequency in Second Life than in the real world.

Librarians must communicate effectively online and must be comfortable using and troubleshooting technology. Unless they have a working computer and are comfortable using it, they will not enjoy virtual world work. The virtual librarian must be ready to face constant change and learning new skills.
Librarians need to be able to help patrons troubleshoot technology and be patient in providing library service in virtual world.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The print media is still a major source of information in libraries. However, the situation is changing, and the university library professionals should be ready for everything and create a Virtual worlds for library services such as Second Life as the next phase of the internet. Just as Libraries had to jump on the bandwagon of the early graphical web in the 1990's, they need to create an effective presence in virtual worlds to investigate what kinds of library services will work and how they can work together to benefits and serve users. This new information environment allows a library to expand some of its local community services to the world at large especially when there is outbreak of any contagious diseases just like corona virus (covid 19). The digital age presents many opportunities (and challenges) to libraries. It is also important that libraries work closely with other educators and collaborate with groups. No one can do everything themselves -collaboration will be key in

establishing virtual world presences for libraries. And there is need for more qualitative and quantitative research in this specific area.

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