BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Virtual Worlds, Real Libraries: Librarians and Educators in Second Life and Other Multi-User Virtual Environments. Edited by Lori Bell and Rhonda B. Trueman. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2008. 272 pages. ISBN-13 978-157387-361-1. US$39.50.

Many librarians are intrigued by the potential of virtual worlds to deliver services to their patrons as well as reach non-traditional library users resident in these environments. I am also aware of librarians who question the value of a virtual world presence, contending that libraries' scarce resources are best used to strengthen traditional services.

In *Virtual Worlds, Real Libraries*, editors Lori Bell, Rhonda B. Trueman, and 24 contributors describe a fascinating array of diverse virtual world library projects which make valuable reading for enthusiasts and sceptics alike. As this is the first text aimed at helping librarians participate in Second Life and other multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs), its 21 chapters will particularly appeal to librarians interested in creating a virtual world presence in a wide variety of contexts—from school and public libraries to university research libraries and library schools.

Assuming no prior knowledge of virtual worlds, *Virtual Worlds, Real Libraries* provides a brief but helpful glossary of common terms. The rich full-colour visuals spanning 16 pages breathe life into the virtual world installations they depict. I find it reassuring for beginners that many authors describe virtual environments in lay terms and candidly discuss their steep learning curves and challenges as complete novices. The text is, however, not intended as a technical primer for those unfamiliar with MUVEs. For that, there are plenty of online tools and print resources.

The greatest strength of the book is the way in which these innovating pioneers describe a multitude of library and educator projects taking place in virtual worlds from personal and varied perspectives. By sharing their rich experiences and lessons learned in virtual worlds, they inspire other librarians with concrete examples of what can be accomplished.

The book is divided into three sections: (1) Virtual Worlds and Libraries, (2) Alliance Virtual Library Project, and (3) Virtual Worlds and Education. In the introductory chapter, the editors begin with a helpful overview of virtual worlds and provide a good summary of the chapters and the initiatives they report on.

The first section, Virtual Worlds and Libraries, examines MUVEs and their potential in supporting libraries and "edutainment." Marty Grover's chapter is particularly helpful to youth educators and librarians as it critically reviews suitable platforms for Library, Education, and Museum (LEM) applications for children and teen projects. The analysis is done against listed criteria with the strengths and weaknesses clearly outlined. Kelly Czarnecki's discussion of virtual world activities for teens (in a later section of the text) nicely supplements Grover's

analysis. Teen librarians exploring the potential of these platforms would benefit from a mention of technological limitations such as the high video-resolution needs and the server limitations for multiple avatars, potentially problematic issues for public libraries and teen programs.

Entitled, Alliance Virtual Library Project, the second part of the book focuses on the developments associated with the Alliance Virtual Library Project in Second Life. I found the chapters in this section to be of the most practical significance to library functions and services (such as reference, management, and collection development) in a virtual world context. However, with all due respect to Alliance Virtual Library's integral role in the establishment of all these key initiatives, I would have found it more helpful to have these chapters organized by theme, such as collections, genres, and services.

S. Thompson's chapter on reference services in a virtual world discusses how virtual worlds alleviate the barriers inherent in traditional virtual reference: channel loss, depersonalization, and interface barriers while posing different challenges. The challenges fall into three areas: social (perception that virtual world activities are "only a game" rather than a serious pursuit); institutional (lack of funding and staff support); and personal (poor patron etiquette and disruptive behaviour). Rhonda Trueman provides an insightful glimpse into collection development techniques and the rewarding challenge of transferring traditional Internet (out-of-world) resources into the virtual environment (in-world). Of particular interest to health librarians is Guus van Den Brekel and Carol Perryman's account of developing the first clinical medical library and consumer health library on HealthInfo Island in Second Life. With National Library of Medicine (NLM) funding and collaboration with multiple partners and health professionals, Brekel and Perryman have found an innovative platform to provide health services and outreach to Second Life residents.

I found the final part of the book, Virtual Worlds and Education, highly relevant to instructional librarians and educators as it focuses on the instructional potential of virtual worlds to support immersive learning. Barbara Galik's chapter on how to make a convincing argument for a virtual world presence is particularly useful in an academic context. Geraldine Purpur and Louise Ochoa discuss the value of a usability study in setting up a presence in Active Worlds to support Appalachian State University's distance learning services. The popularity of the in-depth research assistance sessions delivered in the Information Gardens is very instructive. S. Thompson's chapter on teaching in a virtual setting identifies learning scenarios—such as replicas of historic sites—that benefit most from the potential of 3D virtual environments to simulate a sense of physical presence and support immersive learning experiences.

One theme that permeates the entire text is that the virtual "MUVEment" has been spearheaded by dynamic and innovative librarians on their own time, rather than

library institutions. Another theme is that virtual worlds have proven surprisingly effective for promoting traditional library services such as book discussions, author programs, and displays that inspire reading. Thirdly, the theme of virtual worlds offers a platform for collaboration among librarians, faculty, and other education partners (publishers, authors, and even large corporations) in a manner difficult to achieve in real life. While the book captures a valuable snapshot of virtual libraries and projects prior to its publication (mid 2008), I cannot help questioning whether a static text is the best way of capturing developments on such a rapidly evolving platform as MUVEs. The companion site and the blog in particular (located at http://www.virtualworldsreallibraries.info/index.html) offer a potential forum for ongoing knowledge sharing among librarians in virtual environments.

Virtual Worlds, Real Libraries is required reading for all librarians considering a virtual world presence. It provides an entertaining yet balanced account of both the opportunities and challenges that await those boldly venturing into MUVEs. I am confident that those who read this text will be inspired by the passion, creativity, and commitment of its trailblazing authors.

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