Virtual Worlds

What Are Virtual Worlds?

A virtual world allows opportunities for collaboration, exploration, and role-playing in a simulated environment. They can be used for:

- learning
- building developmental assets
- developing literacy and leadership skills
- gaming
- creative expression
- networking
- integrating social networking tools

Though they may have different purposes, all virtual worlds have:

- Shared space – many users may participate simultaneously
- A graphic interface – either 2D or 3D
- Immediacy – interactions take place in real time
- Interactivity – users may learn, create, do, or build
- Persistence – the world exists whether the user is logged on
- Socialization and community – the world allows and encourages the formation of social groups

(from: www.virtualworldsreview.com/info/whatis.shtml)

For more information on what are virtual worlds and their history, check out the Virtual Worlds Timeline: www.vwtimeline.org.

Terms You Should Know:

Avatar: Graphical representation of yourself—could be a male, female, animal, robot, or even a plate of spaghetti. Action figures are a precursor of avatars.

Friending: Connecting with someone so that you can see when they are online and can instant message (IM) and interact with them. A friend list is a list of people you have opted to connect with.

Griefing: A player who harasses another, similar to encountering a bully. Behavior might include blocking a path, hurling insults, or ganging up on another player.

MMORPG: Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Virtual game world in which users assume the role of fictional characters and work together or separately to develop their characters and participate in game fantasy-themed play. Examples include: Dungeons and Dragons online (www.ddo.com) or Habbo Hotel (www.habbo.com).

MUVE: Multi-User Virtual Environment that are not necessarily game specific. Examples include: There (www.there.com) or Neverwinter Nights (http://nwn.bioware.com).

Real Life (RL): Objects and people in the physical world.

Social Acronyms: Expressions for longer phrases (lol for laughing out loud, or afk for away from keyboard). The Internet Slang Dictionary and Translator allows for searching of terms: www.noslang.com.

For more terms you should know, check out "Avatars and Beyond: Building Virtual Communities with Teens in Libraries." Braun, Linda W. (2007, August). e-VOYA. http://pdfs.voya.com/VO/YA2/VOYA200708tag_team_tech.pdf

Why Do Librarians Need To Know About Virtual Worlds?

In 2007, The Library of Congress announced the large funding of a project to "explore the issue of digital preservation of video games and virtual worlds. . . .for the sake of saving our nation's heritage." The library's interest in virtual worlds, speaks to the importance of just how much a part of people's culture it is. (www.loc.gov/today/pr/2007/07-156.html)

The Horizon Report, which looks at emerging technologies, and is co-published by the New Media Consortium (NMC) (www.nmc.org) and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) (http://tinyurl.com/2a3kz8), stated in 2007; "that virtual worlds are growing in popularity because they combine many of the elements that make Web 2.0 really exciting: social networking; the ability to share rich media seamlessly; the ability to connect with friends; a feeling of presence; and a connection to the community."

Building communities through social networking and exploring cultural objects sounds exactly like the role many libraries are already involved in as part of their services. While not all of our library users might be using virtual worlds, it might be important to understand how we can use virtual worlds not only as a resource to build meaningful relationships with this media rather than it just being a place for consumerism but also work in making the worlds that are popular with our users accessible at the library.

Virtual worlds can help build developmental assets. Most librarians want to encourage positive experiences for youth so that they can grow up as successful and caring adults. The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org/assets) has developed a list of assets. Creating experiences with virtual worlds for youth, can address many of these assets. For example, youth can be seen as resources when they show their peers and other adults how to perform a task such as design clothes for their avatar.

Virtual worlds can also help build skills needed by employers such as communication with different formats, negotiation,

and leadership. Helping these skills used in virtual worlds to translate to real life, might be a great role for librarians to play in working with teens.

How Librarians Are Using Virtual Worlds with Teens

Libraries all over the world are providing access to virtual worlds via their Internet connections such as Gaia Online (www.gaiaonline.com), There (www.there.com), Whyville (www.whyville.net) and RuneScape (www.runescape.com). These are just a small example.

ActiveWorlds (www.activeworlds.com). In the American Library Association, *Smart Libraries Newsletter* (June 2007), Tom Peters article, "Pre-Teen Avatars on a Library Quest" talked about the Virginia Beach Public Library starting a project with ActiveWorlds, spearheaded by librarian Cindy Hart.

Runescape (www.runescape.com). Hutchinson Public Library in Kansas organized a Runescape night in 2006. (www.ckls.org/gaming/runehutch.html) led by Kristine Tossie. Library Runescape teams were started by Chris Rippel with the Central Kansas Library System in 2006. (www.ckls.org/~crippel/runescape/teams.html)

Teen Second Life (TSL) (teen.secondlife.com). Suffern Middle School in New York, owns space on TSL called islands or sims (www.ramapoislands.blogspot.com). Their entire eighth grade has various classes on the islands. The venture is led by their school media specialist.

The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas partnered with Hope Street Charter School to use their island as a platform to teach science classes and more with students (http://tinyurl.com/2yxqgg).

The Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County in Charlotte, North Carolina, (http://eye4youalliance.youthtech.info). owns an island where they partner with educators and teens from around the world to create educational experiences such as a college fair. Hundreds of librarians are involved in Second Life (18 and older) and many of those volunteers serve youth in their 'real lives'.

Whyville (www.whyville.net). In November 2007, the Alliance Library System gave a book discussion to tweens and **teens of Lewis' Voyage of the Dawn Treader to residents.**

World of Warcraft (WoW) (www.worldofwarcraft.com). The Bloomington Public Library in Illinois formed a 'library guild' with teens. They worked together as a team in battle and talked about library services.

Other Examples of Virtual Worlds for Teens

Entropia Universe (www.entropiauniverse.com). Ages: 12 and older. Terms of Service: http://tinyurl.com/2fscvb. System requirements: http://tinyurl.com/2zz9nt. Install required. Users can participate in activities such as hunting, mining, owning land, a store, designing and selling creations for their avatar, and more. Librarians might want to develop a peer group to help other teens get started; reading the map, develop

skills to design weaponry or furniture, and contribute and develop fan sites.

Google Earth (http://earth.google.com). Ages: All. System requirements: http://earth.google.com/faq.html. Download required. A model of the planet from satellite photos that you can add onto such as creating more buildings, through Google SketchUp. School Library Journal (2007, April) published a great article on ways to integrate Google Earth with learning : http://tinyurl.com/3x9y6x.

Habbo Hotel (www.habbo.com). Ages: 13 and older. Terms of Service: http://tinyurl.com/2wlvpk. Shockwave plugin required. "This busy site uses a hotel metaphor as its theme complete with a "lobby" gateway and private 'guest rooms.'" In terms of the amount of users per month, this site has over 7.5 million which indicates this is very popular. Singer Jordin Sparks and Jesse Hart are two of many celebrities that have been to Habbo. Residents of Habbo can ask them questions in real time-good skills to practice for an interview. Frequent room design competitions might resonate with those that personalize their MySpace pages. What a great way to reward self-expression! What might their own library space look like? Forums board: http://habbocentral.us/forums.

The River City Project (http://muve.gse.harvard.edu/rivercityproject). Grades: 6-9. Terms of Service: http://tinyurl.com/2fxey3. System requirements: http://tinyurl.com/22qd8g. Install required. "A Multi-User Virtual Environment for Learning Scientific Inquiry and 21st Century Skills." Students work with each other by interviewing and reading documents including newspapers and photographs to find a cure for a disease that hit this 19th century town. Possibly a partnership with a librarian and school to engage students.

Virtual MTV (www.vmtv.com). Ages: 14 and older. Terms of Service: http://tinyurl.com/35sr4w. System requirements: http://tinyurl.com/2qr8u6. Download required for some of the programs. Users can interact with MTV show stars and create content such as music, movies, and fashion design related to the show's characters. Working with youth to tell stories by creating movies and other content is an important communication and presentation skill to have.

Safety and Virtual Worlds

While this isn't a comprehensive list, it's a starting point when working with teens and or adults for helping teens stay safer in virtual worlds.

- What is the minimum age needed to be able to become a member of the virtual world?
- What kind of personal information is being asked to give when signing up and what is being done with this info. by the company?
- What is the company's Term of Service (TOS) that you are agreeing to when signing up?
- Are photos, text chat, and forums moderated and to what extent?

- Can staff be contacted readily?
- If being bullied or griefed in a virtual world, how can one defend themselves and report the incident?
- What kind of ads, if any are part of the virtual experience? What can one do to ignore them?
- Does your username or profile reveal anything about yourself you wouldn't want everyone to know?
- Can you set up a private game or space within the world to control your environment and who is allowed in?

What are related tools and concepts in virtual worlds that libraries might already offer to teens as services or programs?

- English as a Second Language. There are many opportunities to practice English in a virtual world not only through text communication but voice as well.
- Virtual reference. Create an avatar and publicize when you'll be in the virtual world. Teens might feel more comfortable accessing information through the virtual world rather than in person.
- Supporting web 2.0 technologies. Blog from within the virtual world. Start a conversation on the forums.
- Supporting the curriculum. Virtual worlds are great places for simulations to take place, and concepts of math, science, and language to be integrated with activities.
- Film festivals. The art of shooting film within a 3D environment is called machinima. Teens can make their own movies by recording the activity that takes place in the virtual world and creating the material it into a film.
- Fashion shows. Teens can design digital fashions using Photoshop or Gimp (free) and then organize an online fashion show. Fashion design is a popular past time in some virtual worlds.
- Gaming. There are many puzzles and games within virtual worlds or the world itself might be a game.

For More Information

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To contribute online to this document, visit the YALSA wiki at: http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Virtual_Worlds:_A_Teen_Tech_Week_Guide