

Second Life, Serious Leisure and LIS

by Richard Urban

Although other members of the *Bulletin* Advisory Board may also be students, Richard Urban is the official student member of the board for 2007. The member is chosen by the student chapter that won the ASIS&T Best Student Chapter Award for the previous year – in this case the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where Richard is a doctoral student. He can be reached by email at [rjurban <at>uiuc.edu](mailto:rjurban@uiuc.edu) or at his website: <http://isrl.uiuc.edu/~rjurban>.

In the Fall of 2005 I had the opportunity to participate in a semester-long seminar on game culture and technology offered through the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois. Although I never considered myself a hard-core gamer, I believed that the topic would be an interesting extension of my interest in the use of information science in museums and cultural heritage institutions. Museums, after all, have been exploring the use of informal learning methods through the use of games and play for a long time. With this in mind I took my first steps into the multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) *Second Life*.

Readers of the *Bulletin* have already been provided with some excellent introductions to the issues surrounding game studies and *Second Life*, particularly those by Branston [1], Hinton [2] and Bell [3]. These authors have connected the activities in *Second Life* to Ray Oldenburg's "third places" along with the kinds of informal and situated learning that game studies scholars have identified. Many of these same authors served as guides to my own "adventures" in *Second Life*.

What immediately captured my attention as I began to explore *Second Life* was the number and diversity of museums, galleries and cultural sites that had already been created. Over the course of the next two years, as we studied *Second Life*'s development, the number of these simulations continued to increase. Existing sites grew from small simple displays into full-scale organizations that are creating changing exhibitions, public programming and sponsoring ongoing activities [4].

Even more interesting was that much of this activity was not being driven by real-life institutions, but rather had developed through the efforts of *Second Life* residents who shared common interests. Here was an example of how *Second Life* was serving as a "third place" where people gathered to share these interests and build community. Equally relevant to Oldenburg's ideas of "third place" was the concept of *serious leisure* introduced by Robert Stebbins [5]. For Stebbins, serious leisure activities are not necessarily "fun" or "play" in the traditional sense (although they might be), but are activities that provide participants with other kinds of tangible benefits and rewards. In addition, serious leisure goes beyond an individual activity and suggests a longer-term commitment, participation in a community and social recognition for their engagement. Often participants in serious leisure activities expend a great deal of time and money in pursuit of their interests, such as on travel, on resources or equipment needed or on collecting. Participation in serious leisure often overlaps Oldenburg's third places – a bridge club, a baseball league, a community chorus or a group of rare book collectors. *Second Life* now provides people interested in a particular topic a third place where they can pursue their serious leisure activities. The occurrence of these activities in *Second Life* isn't new, but rather an extension of the behaviors of online communities that have taken advantage of networked computers since their inception. >

What then does this mean for the LIS community? Serious leisure is not an unfamiliar topic, although one that still deserves greater attention. Examples of completed and ongoing research include studies by Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson [6] and Elizabeth Yakel [7], who have written about the information-seeking behaviors of genealogists and family historians, and that by Thomas Dolance and Ron Gilmour [8], who have studied amateur scientists. Currently, UCLA doctoral student Jenna Hartel is working directly with Stebbin's methods to better understand gourmet cooks and culinary hobbyists [9].

I believe that introducing serious leisure concepts to our understanding of MUVES has several benefits. First, it reinforces the reality that virtual worlds are not simply games and that they are not just something for a youth audience. These are adult activities that require passion and commitment and provide benefits not only to their participants, but often to the community as well. The profiles of serious leisure participants look very much like the lifelong learners identified by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and other funding agencies as communities of interest.

Secondly, it ties what libraries are doing in virtual worlds with services and functions that they already provide to serious leisure communities. While I'm not aware of any thorough study that quantifies the use of libraries by different serious leisure communities, my personal experience suggests that libraries are an important, if not essential, part of pursuing serious leisure. Lastly, it moves us beyond the idea that games and MUVES are just about fun. Serious leisure can be work – hard work. A closer study of these activities may help us better understand how to make information seeking and information systems more compelling, if not more fun. That is not to say that we should abandon efforts to find more fun ways of communicating information science to our audiences, but rather to suggest that fun is only part of what virtual environments can do for us.

Increasingly, educational institutions are taking a serious look at *Second Life* as a distance education platform. The School of Library and Information Studies at San Jose State University has been pioneering LIS education class and also participating in the SLoodle (www.sloodle.org) project to integrate *Second Life* with the Moodle (www.moodle.org) course management software. This summer the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was overwhelmed with requests to join a "Virtual World Librarianship" course taught by staff from Information Island (www.infoisland.org). Thanks to the Alliance Library System's efforts, other LIS programs have also been staking ground in *Second Life*.

Recalling that the original Greek sense of *school* is derived from "the employment of leisure" [10] suggests that serious leisure has a place in educational settings. Some serious leisure studies look at "educating" people for serious leisure activities, while others acknowledge that educational activities are a part of serious leisure. Additional research is needed to better understand how concepts of serious leisure might inform approaches in LIS education.

Conversely, *Second Life* and other emerging MUVES will benefit from the research foundation created by ASIS&T. While MUVES can offer a unique view of an information landscape, they also make it that much easier to get lost in the wilderness. If *Second Life* is an example of future networked resources, we will need to translate and apply the principles of information science. The serious leisure communities that inhabit *Second Life* can help us with that task, by providing concrete problems and opportunities for study. Now, won't that be a real adventure! >

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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