

Gimmick or Groundbreaking?

Canadian Academic Libraries
Using Chat Reference in
Multi-user Virtual Environments

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Today

- Traditional & digital reference
- Second Life
- McMaster Pilot
- Future of reference in virtual worlds

Terminology

- Digital reference
 - “The use of human intermediation to answer questions in a digital environment.” (Lankes, 2004)
- Second Life
 - Online multi-user virtual environment
- Presence
 - “The sense of ‘being there’ experienced by users of advanced media.” (Lombard & Jones, 2007)
- Avatar
 - “Representation of a person in a virtual environment.” (Swanson, 2007)

Best of traditional reference

- Librarian-user relationship (Ruppel & Fagan, 2002)
- Instructional nature of the interaction (Ford, 2002)

Worst of traditional reference

- Appearing stupid in front of the librarian
- Unwelcoming atmosphere at the reference desk

Best of digital reference

- Accessibility (Pomerantz & Luo, 2006; Ruppel & Fagan, 2002)
- Being “with it” technology-wise (Lee, 2004; Lippincott, 2006)
- Anonymity

Worst of digital reference

- Lack of non-verbal cues (Francoeur, 2001; Janes, 2002; Luo, 2007)
- Disappearing reference interview (Janes, 2008; Nilsen & Ross, 2006)

Avatars in virtual environments

- Avatars which are highly realistic increase the sense of presence (Bailenson et al., 2006)
- Human faces appear more intelligent and likable (Koda & Maes, 1996)

Libraries in Second Life

- Now numbering in the hundreds
- Exemplify 2.0 concepts (Swanson, 2007)
 - Service at the point of need
 - Free from many barriers
 - Participatory
 - Flexible

Libraries in Second Life



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Reference interactions in SL

- Incorporates the best of traditional and digital reference
 - Adds visual cues to a digital interaction
 - Anonymity means users don't feel stupid when speaking to the librarian
 - Visual representation of chat facilitates the flow of the conversation
 - Avatars increase the sense of “being there”

Existing Virtual Reference Service

- Alliance Library service on Info Island International
- 80 hours of service by international librarians
- 6500 visitors asked 2400 questions
- 2200 Second Life questions
- 200 real life questions

McMaster University Library Pilot

- Objectives
 - Explore the potential of reference services in virtual worlds
 - Discover the resources and training required by such a service
 - Learn the level of need for this service

Training for McMaster Pilot

- Based on Alliance Library training
- Must create Second Life Account prior to training sessions
- 1st session - Second Life Basics
- 2nd session - Second Life Reference Basics
- 3rd session - time to explore

Phase 1 of McMaster Pilot

- May 1- July 31 2007
- 6 staff (5 librarians, 1 IT staff)
- 6 hours of service per week
- 93 Second Life questions
- 23 real reference questions

Phase 1 of McMaster Pilot (continued)

- Little marketing (blog, LCD panels)
- Mostly librarians and Second Life residents
- Few McMaster faculty, alumni, students, incoming students

Phase 2 of McMaster Pilot

- Continue through academic year (Sept-April)
- Increase to 8 hours/week
- Little marketing again
- 79 Second Life reference questions
- 11 real reference question

Considerations

- Better statistic taking
- Better marketing
- New island
- Voice

Implications

- High technical requirements
- Cost of staff time
- Cost of space in Second Life

Do Avatars Make A Difference?

- Need for a reference interview
- Conversation flows easily
- Anonymity may help communication
- Gestures and images seem to add to a chat interaction

Future of Virtual World Reference

- Statistics suggest there is a need
- Point of need issue
- Important to prepare for the future
- Gartner Report suggests 80% of online users will have avatars by 2010

Ultimately

“Librarians must find creative ways to support people in forming sites of collective intelligence, searching information, working within social networks, and producing knowledge. If not, **they run the risk of rendering themselves, for much of the public at least, largely obsolete.**”

(Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005)

Thank You Merci



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