

Second Life (SL) is a 3-D virtual world established by Linden Labs in 2003ⁱ. There are currently more than 14 million registered second life accounts but the size of the active user base of second life is a matter of some debate with 30 – 50,000 users usually logged in at anyone time. To start using second life you must create an account at www.secondlife.com the website where you will also find the SL installer application which is required to enter SL or go 'in world'.

The nitty gritty of second life can get quite complex but a scan of the SL entry in wikipedia will provide potential readers with a broad range of useful informationⁱⁱ. I will briefly summarise some key features. Basic accounts are free while there is a modest annual charge for premium accounts (advantages include a weekly stipend and land ownership rights). Key concepts include avatars (the form users take in SL) and objects ('things' created by users). Users can buy, earn and spend linden dollars. The Linden dollar is SL's 'in world' currency and is one of the key drivers of SL's success as linden dollars can be exchanged for US dollars at rate of about 1 US\$ to 270 lindens. Avatars can communicate in a variety of ways including instant messaging/chat and voice. There is certainly some unsavoury content to be found in SL but no more than anywhere else online, or in the real world for that matter, and it is arguably harder to stumble across unwittingly in SL than when using some other online services.

In the relatively short time since its creation second life has undergone some significant changes but one of the constants throughout has been interest in its educational potential. Many universities from across the US, the UK, continental Europe, Asia and Australia have a presence in SL. Princeton, Harvard and Stanford are all active in Second Life. Within this movement academic libraries have been at the forefront of the use of Second Life. There are now over 40 library-related islands (virtual land masses) each with many libraries. For example there are around 40 libraries in cybrary city which is just one part of infoisland. There are academic and special libraries, public libraries, library suppliers, health information libraries and even themed libraries e.g. The Caledon branch library where avatars wear Victorian style garb 'in-world'.

These libraries are using SL to provide a range services. In many cases libraries are using SL to provide an alternative route to existing services. They are using SL to provide reference services, to host book discussion groups and other 'traditional' library activities. SL is particularly suitable when dealing with readers a considerable physical distance away from a library's physical location. It is also very helpful when working with readers that are for some reason uncomfortable, unwilling or unable to physically access the library. SL is also especially suited to some disciplines including art, design and media due to the potential of the 3-D interface. This interface is also attractive to a new generation of readers that grew up using the Internet and playing video games. There are benefits associated with SL for library staff too. Libraries are using SL for training – by recreating in the virtual world some real life scenarios. Another huge benefit of

SL is networking – as a result of my own work in SL I have worked with library staff from all over the world.

There are some issues that any Library considering entering second life would have to assess. Chief among these are technology issues. Access to SL can be problematic. It requires a robust internet connection and quite an open network configuration. Security concerns on the part of IT departments are quite common. If you don't have access to Facebook for example Second Life could be regarded with even greater suspicion! There are some issues with regard to the reliability of SL as a platform. The developers were caught out by the speed of its expansion and it is not uncommon for SL to struggle once US users come online in numbers. Other issues include: ownership (linden literally owns the world and have in the past removed whole islands when they have deemed this necessary), digital nomads (there are many rival 'worlds' to SL and some are now making gains and winning over users) and cultural concerns (many staff in your library may be uncomfortable with the idea of a presence in SL). While these concerns require careful consideration the recent success of UCD's Library Ireland Week activities in SL as part of the virtual venues strand convinced many of the merits of SL. Over 100 avatars from all over Ireland and the world attended a range of events including a talk by Anne Seidl (director of The Hollywood Librarian), a class by Professor Mary Burke from UCD and two tours of Second Life. See the attached pictures for some colourful images of these events. Importantly, these events also caught the imagination of the national press and they featured in the *Irish Independent* and on the radioⁱⁱⁱ.

Technology consultants Gartner recently estimated that by 2011 80% of internet users will have some form of virtual 'second life' and this points to the most striking aspect of SL - its similarity to the world wide web in the mid-1990s^{iv}. In the mid-1990s there were about 80,000 websites, now there are billions and it would be unthinkable for most libraries not to have a site of some form^v. Will virtual worlds be the websites of the 21st Century?

ⁱ Second Life, <http://secondlife.com/whatis/> (accessed Aug, 11th 2008)

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life (accessed Aug. 11th 2008)

ⁱⁱⁱ Silicon Republic, <http://www.siliconrepublic.com/news/article/10007/randd/ucd-takes-first-steps-as-second-life-university/> (accessed Aug. 11th 2008)

^{iv} Gartner Group, <http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861> (accessed Aug 11th 2008)

^v Netcraft, http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html (accessed Aug 11th 2008)