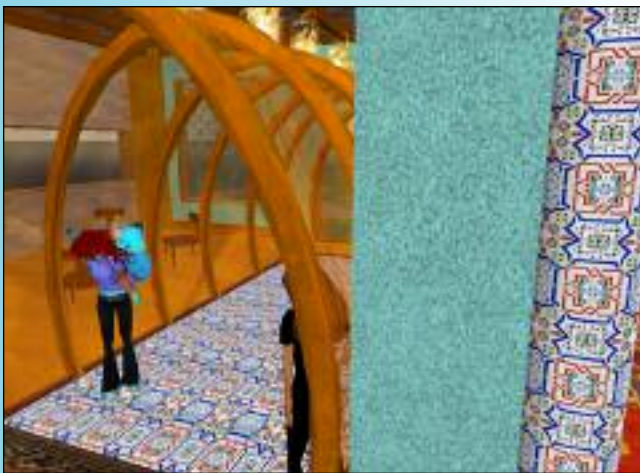




AVATARS AND BEYOND:

Building Virtual Communities with Teens in Libraries

▶ LINDA W. BRAUN



▲ BLUEWINGS HAYEK (KELLY CZARNECKI) AND LUCY THEEUWES (LINDA BRAUN IN BLACK) IN THE FIREBALL CAFE IN SECOND LIFE.

LUCY THEEUWES (LINDA BRAUN) WITH TEENS OUTSIDE THE NEW TOWN HALL IN TEEN SECOND LIFE. ▼



During the American Library Association Conference in Washington, D.C., in June 2007, I sat down with Kelly Czarnecki to talk about virtual environments such as **Second Life** and **Teen Second Life**, in libraries in general and with teens in particular. Czarnecki is an educational technology librarian at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County in North Carolina and the manager of the Teen Second Life Library Project, “a pilot program exploring the creation of teen library services in a virtual world,” according to its Web site. (See <http://plcmc.org/teens/secondlife.asp>.) The following is a transcript of our conversation.

[*Editor's Note: Words in bold italics within the text are defined in the glossary.*]

LWB: *What's the simplest way of explaining what **Second Life** is to those who don't know?*

KC: It's an incredible communications tool. I like to break it down and think about it as just that. We use communications tools all the time—the telephone, **Skype**, a Web site. It's another way of connecting with others but it is so much more interactive than a phone call. It's communications in a world that teens and others get to create on their own.

LWB: *What should a librarian serving teens who is brand new to virtual environments do to get started learning about these worlds?*

KC: First, librarians might want to learn why they should care about virtual environments. A good place to find that answer is in an article that appeared online in **EDUCAUSE CONNECT**, *7 Things You Should Know About Virtual Worlds* (see “More Resources” at the end of this article). Librarians who already have an understanding of why they should care, and who want to know about virtual worlds other than **Second Life** might visit a virtual-world travel agency such as **Synthravel**, and visit other online worlds. (See list of “Virtual Worlds to Investigate” at the end of this article.)

Next, get comfortable with what an *avatar* is—a participant's online form in a virtual world. Create an avatar and introduce yourself via your avatar on your Web site. (Try these sites to create an avatar: **Mii Editor** and **Yahoo! Avatars** in

A VIRTUAL WORLD GLOSSARY

Avatar: A virtual representation of yourself. In **Second Life**, **Teen Second Life**, and many other virtual (and not virtual) games and environments, participants create an avatar whom others see in place of the physical person.

Cosplay: Combines the words “costume” and “role-play” to describe dressing as characters from anime, manga, and other role-playing environments.

Friend: In the virtual world, a friend is someone to whom you give permission to connect with you in some way online. For example, by being friends in the **Second Life** world, Kelly and Linda can see each other “*in world*.”

In world: Refers to being logged into **Second Life** or **Teen Second Life**.

Machinima: Movies made from screenshots of video games.

Mii: Avatars specifically created as part of the Nintendo Wii gaming system.

Skype: A software program that allows users to make voice calls via their computer instead of the phone.

World of Warcraft (MMORPG): A massively multi-player online role-playing game in which players use an avatar to take part in quests.

the resources section.) Let teens know that you use the avatar whom you create to represent yourself in virtual worlds.

To experience what a virtual world is like, librarians might also want to go to the **Second Life** site and sign up for an account. Start with personal hobbies and find out what is happening in **Second Life** related to those hobbies.

Also discover what educators are doing in **Second Life** by either joining the Second Life Educators mailing list or visiting Infoisland (from the Second Life Library Project). Infoisland has eleven islands to visit where you talk to people and see what they are doing. The mailing lists are a good way to put yourself out there. You might write, “Hey, I’m a librarian and I’m trying to figure out what to do with this world. Any ideas?” Among thousands of people on the mailing lists, chances are that someone will have ideas for you about how to get started. The community is really helpful.

You shouldn’t feel as if you have to be perfect and know everything when you visit a virtual world for the first time. I have paid attention to John Beck’s book, **Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever** (Harvard, 2004). When librarians realize that virtual worlds such as **Teen Second Life** are places where “real world” valuable skills like those that Beck discusses—including teamwork, taking risks, and creative play—can occur, then it’s worth finding out how adults’ and librarians’ presence in such environments can foster and cultivate these skills.

LWB: *What should we say to librarians—particularly librarians who work with teens—to help them understand why they should pay attention to virtual environments?*

KC: Gartner, Inc., a technology and research advisory company, predicted in April 2007 that 80 percent of active Internet users will have a “Second Life” (but not necessarily one in **Second Life**) by 2011. That prediction is supported by the number of virtual worlds being launched in the U.S. and in many other countries. Not only in terms of the future of the Internet but also for future libraries and librarians, we need to ask ourselves if teens have the tools to navigate these spaces. We need to think about whether or not parents and caregivers understand why teens are part of these communities and what they are

doing in these spaces. We need to focus on how we as librarians can mediate and add to these experiences and help them to be positive.

Many of these worlds have direct connections to online gaming experiences in which teens are already involved. Why not find ways to get into those environments where teens already are, as a library, and see what we can do there? More and more companies are creating space in these environments; these spaces are becoming service points. Why not have the library offer services there as well?

LWB: *What are some ways that libraries can get started bringing **Second Life** or other virtual environments to their customers?*

KC: Start with some of the customers’ interests. For example, librarians present genealogy programs in **Second Life**. Perhaps marketing such programs in the library will help patrons to understand these communities. Find out what is going on in other virtual worlds, such as contests, concerts, and other events. Consider connecting virtual programs to the popular programs that you already provide inside the library. For example, if you have a successful anime club, let teens know about **Gaia Online** and the creative writing community around it, which will give teens another outlet to express their art and interests. Performing music for an audience might already be part of an open mic night at your library. Find out how to stream audio into **Teen Second Life** and then you will make it possible for teens across the world to hear a group from your library performing.



LWB: *What should we be doing for and with teens when it comes to virtual worlds including **Second Life**?*

KC: We need to be in the virtual worlds to understand the kind of literacy (visual, cultural, etc.) that exists in these environments. We need to build programs off of the events in these worlds. We need to explore the kinds of interactivity that can be accomplished more successfully in virtual worlds than in real life.

Often people ask how we bring teens back through virtual environments to our physical space at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County. I have seen a natural interaction in which teens bring what’s going on in virtual environments to their community. Teens and librarians can exchange knowledge

WHAT’S UP WITH TEENS IN TEEN SECOND LIFE

What do teens do in **Teen Second Life**?

- They build places and things. At the **Teen Second Life Library**, a new Town Hall just went up. The teens are now thinking about how it’s going to be furnished and what it needs to include. There will, of course, be couches and chairs and there might be entertainment venues such as a jazz club. The teens do all the building.
- They script places and things. For example, a teen might want a clock to make sound or give someone the ability to lie down when on a couch. Making those things happen is all in the scripting that teens do themselves.
- They learn about technology, books, people, and more. Recently there was a *machinima* weekend in **Teen Second Life**, in which teens learned how to create movies made from screenshots of video games and then showed off their work.
- They hang out with friends. **Teen Second Life** gives teens a chance simply to talk with friends about various topics such as politics, food, and clothing. It’s a place to be with others and be a part of a group.



▲
A MEETING IN THE
VIRTUAL TEENS'
LIBRARY LOFT.

about virtual worlds. For example, when I woke up one morning, I received this Skype message: “Kelly! I created a poster of your library! We won 4th place!” It came from a teen in the U.K. who is an active participant in **Teen Second Life**. He was inspired to do a class project about my real-life library because I let him know about it when we talk in **Teen Second Life**.

These worlds provide incredible teaching and learning opportunities. No longer are adults standing up in the front of a room to lecture. The virtual environment changes the power dynamics. In virtual worlds, there is no more sitting behind the desk for librarians. We must have conversation with teens, up close and “in your face,” when we meet in these environments. Sometimes if we’re not comfortable with that kind of interaction in real life, this virtual environment can help us feel more comfortable when asking teens questions.

LWB: *If a librarian wants to talk to teens about virtual worlds, what kinds of questions should she ask?*

KC: At your library, pay attention when you see teens in virtual worlds. Ask them to tell you about the environment that they are visiting. There are commonalities in the way things work in virtual worlds, and you learn the skills to use from one community to another. In the future, avatars will probably be able to travel from one world to another; if you’re a healer in **World of Warcraft**, for example, you can drop in on **Second Life** as the same persona. In my experience, teens are willing to invite you into their world to tell you about it and to “friend” you. Teens want to show it to you. It is their world but they like it when adults try to learn to be a part of it.

LWB: *I know that you have thought a lot about how virtual environments support the Search Institute’s forty developmental assets. (See <http://www.search-institute.org/assets>.) Tell me about that.*

KC: Well, avatar building has a lot to do with positive identity—including the ability to construct and reconstruct the self through virtual physical appearance. Teens are empowered in virtual worlds through opportunities to be entrepreneurs and to make money by creating and selling products. Teens develop

social competencies by building other adult relationships, encountering positive peer influence, and working with people of different backgrounds.

LWB: *Do you see teens changing how their avatars look on a regular basis?*

KC: Yes and no, some do and some don’t. Teens can create their own hair and clothing whenever they want. They can change every day. Many teens ask for feedback on how their avatar looks. They ask each other for hairstyles (some teens design hair) such as dreadlocks. Some teens take on the opposite gender from the one that they have in real life. The more refined that virtual worlds become, the more teens and adults will probably identify with their avatars and develop them as a way to explore real-life issues.

LWB: *Any final words?*

KC: I think of the programs that libraries are already doing—fashion shows, **cosplays**,

and so on. Why not start looking at how we can connect what teens are doing in virtual environments with what already goes on in the library? All it takes is getting started and a bit of magic. It doesn’t have to make sense all at once. Suspend your belief about what is possible and give up the idea that you have to be the adult in control. Put on some wings and fly. ■

RESOURCES

Virtual Worlds to Investigate

Gaia Online <http://www.gaiaonline.com>
Habbo Hotel <http://www.habbo.com/hotel>
Meez <http://www.meez.com/home.dm>
MTV’s Virtual World <http://www.vmtv.com/help.html>
Music Lounge
<http://www.themusiclounge.com/faces/pages/index.xhtml>
Second Life <http://www.secondlife.com>
Synthravel <http://www.synthravel.com>
Teen Library in Teen Second Life
<http://plcmc.org/teens/secondlife.asp>
Teen Second Life <http://teen.secondlife.com>
There <http://www.there.com>
Whyville <http://www.whyville.net>
Zwinky <http://tinyurl.com/yb229b>

More Resources

Gartner Research <http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861>
Infoisland <http://www.infoisland.org>
Mii Editor <http://miieditor.com>
Second Life Educators Work with Teens Mailing List
<https://lists.secondlife.com/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/educatorsandteens>
7 Things You Should Know About Virtual Worlds
<http://connect.educase.edu/library/abstract/7ThingsYouShouldKnow/39392>
The New Literacy
<http://content.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=263>
Yahoo! Avatars <http://tinyurl.com/3856g4>