Grassroots: A Second Life Campus from the Ground Up

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Abstract

The Buffalo State Island is an example of grassroots virtual development for a campus. The Research Foundation of the State University of New York committed to providing a virtual space for virtual campus scholarship and creativity, as well as working towards establishing an initial institutional presence for areas on campus that are interested in establishing a virtual presence in Second Life. The initial BSC SL Pilot Group is comprised of faculty, staff, administration and students who are exploring, researching and planning a campus-wide introduction to Second Life. Phase one was completed in spring 2007. Phase two for summer 2007 is just beginning.

Background

The Second Life project started in January 2007. Members of the faculty, staff, and administration on campus that had expressed an interest in researching and/or exploring virtual educational environments were identified. The first official meeting of the group was held at the Buffalo State Research Foundation offices in January 2007 where preliminary goals were developed for introducing Second Life to the Buffalo State campus community. At the initial meeting, an official BSC SL Campus Pilot group was formed to explore, research and develop a plan for a campus-wide introduction to Second Life.

Phase One: Spring 2007

The focus for the initial spring 2007 semester was researching and/or implementing methods to introduce SL to the campus and researching the technical support and hardware requirements for eventually making SL available campus wide. All members of this group tried to mentor or advise wherever needed to inform, encourage or assist with projects or research conducted by other members of the BSC college campus. After researching other educational institutions it was determined that the privacy advantages to owning a private educational island would facilitate the BSC SL Campus Pilot group. In February, the Research Foundation sponsored the purchase of a 16 acre virtual educational island in Second Life named Buffalo State. Faculty members of the group were encouraged to involve undergraduate and graduate students in the initial pilot project. Initially an Info Pad was set up on the island as a central meeting point for the BSC SL Pilot group participants in world.

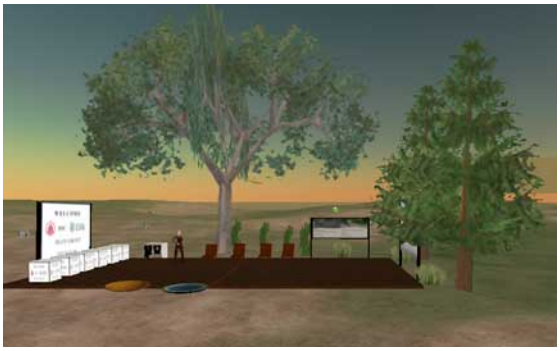

Figure 1: SL Pilot Group Info Pad in SL.

While under development, the Buffalo State island is not open to the public. The BSC SL Pilot Group was set up in SL and members of the group were added to allow access to the private educational island. As the island develops, portions of it will be opened up to visitor group members.

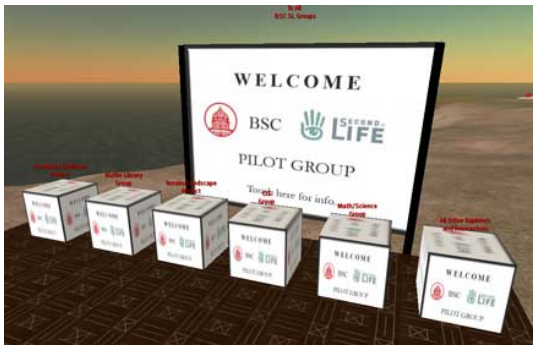

Figure 2: Drop boxes were set up for different research groups

The primary phase one goal of the BSC SL Pilot group was to explore, research, and develop a plan for campus-wide introduction to Second Life.

To achieve the primary goal it was decided to introduce SL to the BSC Campus first by addressing activities in RL (Real Life) by:

1. Promoting how other educators are integrating SL into their coursework.
2. Posting and/or developing teaching tools and tutorials for SL.
3. Developing and posting SL resources.
4. Developing an introductory article about the sponsorship, formation and goals of the SL BSC Campus Pilot Group.
5. Documenting and presenting exploratory SL projects that are developed as part of this campus group.
6. Trying to develop ways to remove attitudinal barriers to SL for teaching by demonstrating a variety successful teaching applications in SL for different areas of the campus.
7. Trying to develop ways to remove physical barriers to SL for teaching, such as hardware requirements and security issues relating to the frequency of required upgrades to the client software.
8. Providing client software for SL access on an individual basis to members of the BSC SL Pilot Group.
9. Testing alternative access procedures and making them available to members of the group as they are developed.

Different levels of participation evolved in this diverse initial pilot group. Some members BSC SL Pilot Group participated by developing a teaching project, researching, or exploring in SL. The initial Research Foundation proposal included support for the Virtual Fashion Project which would be integrated into an existing course planned for the spring 2007 semester.

To encourage future collaborations, several introductory workshops were set up to introduce and familiarize SL Pilot Group members and other campus constituencies that are interested in learning more about teaching and research possibilities in SL. One on one introductory meetings were also arranged. The primary location for accessing Second Life on the BSC campus is a lab that is used for the Virtual Fashion Project. This and several other single computers on campus are currently the only locations for Second Life access on the campus until the Computing & Technology Services support group can successfully resolve hardware and security issues related to Second Life. BSC SL Pilot group members were encouraged to join the various educator list serve and research support groups available through the Second Life educator section. Faculty members from Performing Arts, Design, CASTL, Exceptional Education, Computing Information Systems, Creative Studies,

Math and Science expressed interest in learning more about SL.

Butler Group

The E. H. Butler Library began work in SL by teaming two librarians with the Web coder and a training specialist from Computing & Technology Services under the "encouraging supervision" of the library administration. Much was learned. Short term and longer term goals were set. The overall primary goal is to have the Library portion of the BSC Island act as a portal to existing library resources and collections by having a reference librarian available to answer questions via chat or IM, links to Web resources, pod casts and other virtual collections.
Initially time was spent experimenting, interacting with other librarians in the Alliance Library System and in world, shopping, building, and learning to think in 3-D.
Some of our shorter term initial goals were to:

1. Place a reference desk with a buzzer to access librarians.
2. Set up a virtual computer that links to library homepage.
3. Set up a virtual computer that links to the archives homepage.
4. Plan exhibit space.
5. Build a replica of the Butler Ice Fountain.
6. Plan the area and set up pod casting for the Rooftop Poetry Club
7. Upload SL resources.

A temporary library building structure was set up for our group in SL so we could begin experimenting in a hands-on fashion and building for our short-team goals.

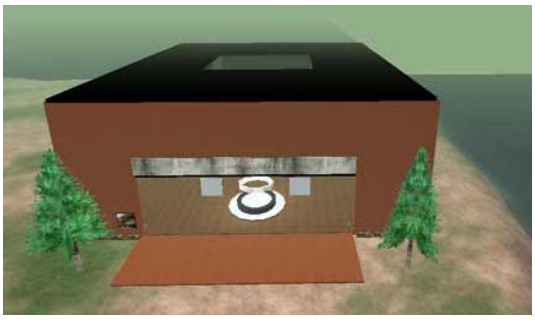

Figure 3: Temporary Butler Building in SL.

Once we explored SL more, a plan was developed for a Rooftop Poetry Center that was placed above the temporary library building area.

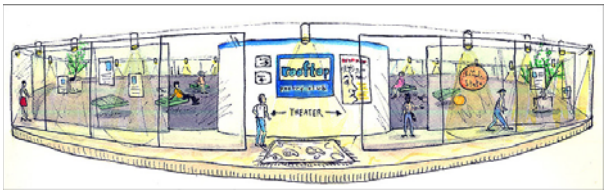

Figure 4: Rooftop Poetry Center sketch by Dennis Reed.

Figure 5: Rooftop Poetry in SL.

Six weeks later we had a different view of what we wanted for the Butler Library building in SL, and more importantly how we wanted to structure our services. Each of the librarians began presenting their findings to campus and regional groups. Second Life became more real.
In the beginning of this SL project we thought we wanted a building representing the Real Life Butler Library in SL. After our group experienced and explored more in SL, we determined that we would like a free and

open virtual space to represent the library similar to the Rooftop Poetry Center.

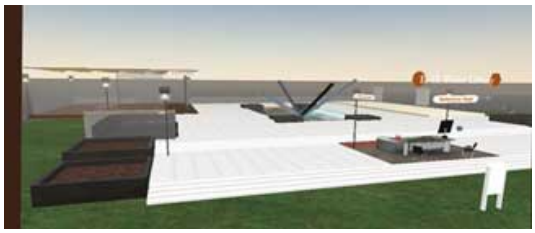

Figure 6: New Butler SL space currently under construction, Butler Ice Fountain recreation is in the center.

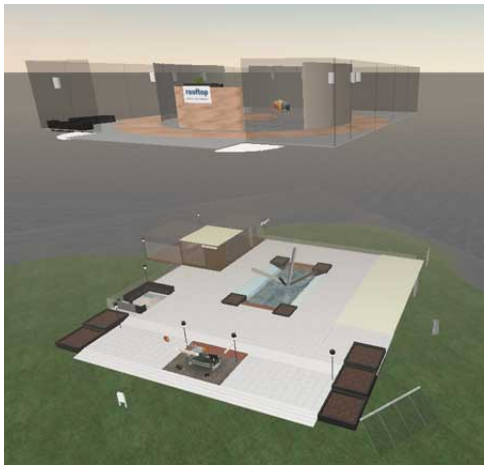

Figure 7: Butler space and Rooftop Poetry area.

The administration is still struggling with details like the mechanics of efficiently upgrading the client software, but the leap into the MUVE has been taken. Our Second Life locale also will provide a virtual space to recreate a treasured symbol, the Butler Ice Fountain that had to be dismantled this spring after 24 years.

Computing and Technology Services support group

The Academic Computing arm of Computing and Technology Services was eager to be involved with this project. Given the evolution of social networking, MMOG, and virtual worlds as discussed in the Horizon Report (New Media Consortium, 2007), Second Life posed an interesting challenge.

Academic Computing desired to keep the pilot limited to one campus lab where the Virtual Fashion Project was taking place, and to a finite number of students and faculty and was able to devote time from three different resources.

The first resource was approximately .15 FTE, lab coordinator. This individual was primarily responsible for ensuring that the lab equipment would support the virtual world (e.g. RAM, Video Card, bandwidth, etc.). As an added bonus, this particular individual devoted some of his own time to learning and exploring SL.

The second source was approximately .10 FTE of the senior training consultant for Academic Computing. This individual was primarily responsible for learning the virtual environment and exploring the use of this world as a communication and pedagogical tool. He was able to provide additional technical insight and also happened to spend his own time exploring SL.

The third source was the director of academic computing who directed the efforts of the above mentioned staff and met with faculty and staff on the project. In cooperation with a faculty member from Computing and Information Systems (CIS), an academic department on campus, a group of CIS students was assembled and asked to look into certain aspects of SL to give a student's perspective and some technical insight.

As reported above, the pilot was limited to one lab with a finite number of students and faculty. The labs were recently upgraded and no additional equipment was needed. One limiting factor to explore was the structure of computing administration on campus. Labs are locked with a specific image and students store work elsewhere. Administrative rights to the labs are given only to departments willing and able to provide a qualified technical liaison restricted to specific functions and

connected to one of the lab coordinators in Academic Computing. In this case, Professor Polvinen was able to fill that role in this lab, and work directly with the lab coordinator from Academic Computing. Likewise, faculty desktop computers are administered centrally.

At the time that this project began, Linden Labs was regularly updating Second Life. Updates were coming weekly proving to be problematic for a centrally administered operation.

Some issues that were considered, in concert with the student group as well, were:

- Would we need to actually protect the identity of the College?
- How would we protect the identity of students?
- How robust does the equipment need to be to run the software?
- How do we administer updates to lab and faculty machines?
- How much time will a lab coordinator need to devote to support a lab running SL and programs like it?
- Will we need to upgrade all labs or just some? (e.g. dedicated labs?)
- Will faculty train and support their students to use SL or will the campus need to provide resources?
- Will faculty really use SL to teach? If so, how quickly will it be adopted? Is there interest?

We are currently evaluating our experiences from this past semester with much laughter and reflection, and our outlook is positive.

Faculty and Student Participation.

The island in Second Life was not in place until the end of February 2007. With the exception of the Virtual Fashion Project, it was not a viable option to officially integrate SL into any other existing courses on campus. This was due to the date that the island (which was well into the spring semester) was in place and the limitation of access to SL on the campus.

A Pilot group faculty member set up a project WIKI for members to document their SL exploration and research. The URL is http://www.bscsecondlife.info

Figure 8: Fashion Students meeting at Info Hub.

Some undergraduate and graduate students worked in SL exploring and researching on an independent study basis for pilot group faculty members. Several graduate students presented their finding at the Research Foundation Scholarship and Creativity Celebration.

The Virtual Fashion Project was a major project that was integrated into the last seven weeks of an existing course. In addition to Second Life it incorporated another virtual fashion application. The assignments in the project were all developed to prepare students to conceptualize in 3D.

Figure 9: SL Fashion Collection Vendor Exhibit in SL.

One of the final assignments in the Fashion Project involved students participating in a fashion show in SL as well as an exhibit where students packaged their SL fashion collections in vendors.

Phase Two: Summer 2007

The plans for summer 2007 involve focusing on a preliminary institutional and formalized faculty presence on the island. Because the island is being developed as a grassroots campus effort, form following function is the current development direction. We don't have funding to hire professional virtual builders so this is strictly a pragmatic learn-as-you-go do-it-yourself grassroots campus project by all interested campus parties. We are planning the island to accommodate areas for a preliminary institutional presence, a formalized faculty, staff and student project area and a sandbox area that will be open to everyone.

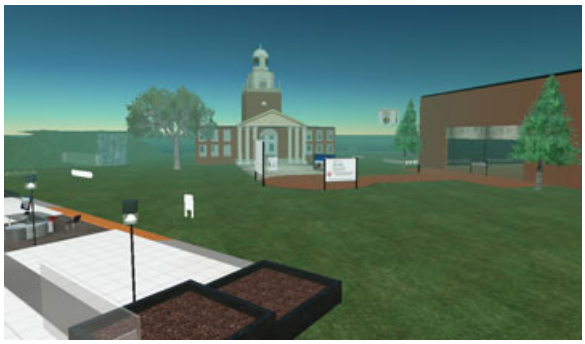

Figure 10: Development of campus area.

The active Butler group is expanding the development of their SL plot of the island. Buildings with some familiar elements of the real campus are currently in progress for institutional areas of the college that have expressed interest in an SL presence and plans are in progress to provide SL faculty media areas and to set up a system for faculty to apply online for space in SL for their classes.
Plans will be developed over the summer to place SL in another campus lab location where small faculty workshops can be scheduled to introduce SL and to present how SL can be used as a teaching tool. Additional teaching materials will also be developed over the summer to continue the Virtual Fashion Project as a stand-alone course.

The Next Step

The expansion of our Second Life campus is currently restricted by limitations of hardware and security issues. The Buffalo State Campus Pilot Group will continue to explore, research and integrate SL on a limited basis until those issues can be resolved.
The primary lesson we all are learning from the Second Life Campus Project is that despite limitations in funding, anything is possible with the unified interest, perseverance and dedication of a small number of individuals on a campus.

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