

Stepping into Literature

Conference in the Virtual World of Second Life

'A personal experience'

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Introduction

On 6 August 8.00 – 4.00 Pacific Daylight Time (PDT), I attended the *Stepping into Literature* conference in the virtual world of Second Life. There were no train or flight tickets to book, no need to print out directions to the venue or arrange accommodation; for a virtual conference the prime preparation is to create and register your avatar; your virtual 3D representation which attends in your place. For this you need a high spec computer with a powerful graphics card and a broadband connection to the Internet. Once you've downloaded the free Second Life software and named and gendered your avatar, you are ready to log into another world. This virtual reality area of the Internet has been used within the educational curriculum of the US for some years and in the UK, a growing number of universities have their own areas for teaching and learning.

There were a number of reasons for taking part in this conference.

1. Part of my work remit is the technological enhancement of teaching and learning. Higher education is currently in a transition phase. On the one hand there is the institutional monolith of the Virtual Learning Environment; typical of the retrospectively named Web 1.0 phase of the Internet. On the other is the user generated content of Web 2.0 where freely available open source software enables self publishing on a previously unimaginable scale. Second Life is a part of the Web 2.0 revolution and this was an ideal opportunity to engage with its electronic landscapes.
2. I first visited Second Life about a year ago and a year is a long time in the computer world. Linden Labs; the company who created Second Life, continually update their software requiring greater capacity from the computers accessing it. It wasn't long before the software outstripped my computer's ability to run it. I now had a more powerful laptop and *Stepping into Literature* was the ideal opportunity for a road test.
3. I thought it would provide a comparison with other methods of virtual conferencing. As a student with the Open University I'm familiar with the potential loneliness of distance learning and the advantages and limitations of online discussions and conferencing; I wondered if Second Life could offer a realistic alternative to existing communication forums.
4. *Stepping into Literature* was designed as an immersive experience. The subject was US literature in the 20th century; a genre I did not know a great deal about. Taking part would be an opportunity to assess how well the environment supported and enhanced my own learning in an area where I could claim little previous knowledge.

Pre conference preparation

The conference organisers, *Learning Times*, offered an orientation session for new users on the evening of 5 August (UK time). All conference times are Pacific Daylight Time (PDT), which corresponds to Second Life Time (SLT). In the UK this means that as the working day is beginning in the US, so in the UK it is just ending. Also, as participation involves being attached to your computer, this limits what else you can do while taking part, so it can be a long working day.

The orientation was moderated by people experienced in teaching and learning in Second Life. Since I last logged into this virtual world voice chat taken over from text and I'd forgotten many basics such as how to sit down. Initially I found the complexity of the menu structures overwhelming. One skill you need in abundance is the ability to multi task and unless you are an experienced Second Lifer then an orientation session before the conference is essential. Important skills included navigation and teleporting between locations via maps and SLurls, adding and extracting items from your Inventory and the etiquette of both voice and text based communication.

There is also the question of appearance. Second Life is a virtual world and in spite of – or because of this – appearance for many avatars is of paramount importance. The basic avatar comes with a body and a wardrobe, both having an impressive array of colours, sizes and shape options. Anything outside of this must be purchased. 1 US dollar is worth @ 250 Lindens. This small financial deposit opens up the virtual world of online shopping where not only can wings and fairy dust be acquired but also a range of gestures and fancy dress costumes from dragons to snowmen. Decisions about how to present yourself online – when the choices are limitless – can become surprisingly complex and time consuming. The best recommendation for work related events is to go more or less as yourself.

Keynote/Welcome Address

8:00 a.m. – 8:50 a.m. (SLT)

The programme opened in traditional manner with a Keynote/Welcome Address entitled "A Vision for Making Literature Come Alive in Virtual Worlds". The speaker was Beth Ritter-Guth (Desideria Stockton in Second Life) the creator of Literature Alive! an academic project which collects and distributes resources for the development of educational literary projects in Second Life.

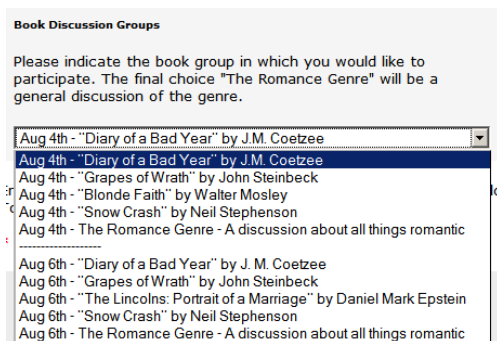


The Keynote took place in *The Amp* conference centre. I arrived at the end having made an error converting the times and this was surprisingly disconcerting; even though it was a virtual world where you can in theory be and do what ever you want, real world conventions are hard to leave behind. The screen was crowded with avatar name labels and I

couldn't remember how to remove them. The only instruction I could find was to '*detach clothes*'. The next event was the book discussions and, with or without name labels, I needed to find out where to go. Joining instructions said you would be given the location of each discussion 'in-world' and arriving late, I seemed to have missed this.

Book Discussions

9:00 a.m. - 9:45 a.m. (SLT)



During registration my choice of discussion group was the *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Not having read the novel, thought it would be an opportunity to assess the extent of my learning experience. I had SL sound on and heard the words *Land of Lincoln*. This had been the starting point for the orientation session so the location was in my inventory and I thought maybe the instructions would also be there. I teleported but found no instructions.

By now, I was feeling irrationally concerned about being lost and arriving late yet again. I walked over to an imposing looking house where an avatar in a black suit and large sunglasses opened a pair of huge wooden doors. I arrived in a formal room where people were sitting on individual chairs talking among themselves. This was a book discussion but, as soon as someone mentioned the family of Lincolns, I realised it was referring to a different book and not the *Grapes of Wrath*.

If it was a real life conference I would have double checked the itinerary. I hadn't put the same amount of preparation into this virtual conference and that was clearly a mistake.



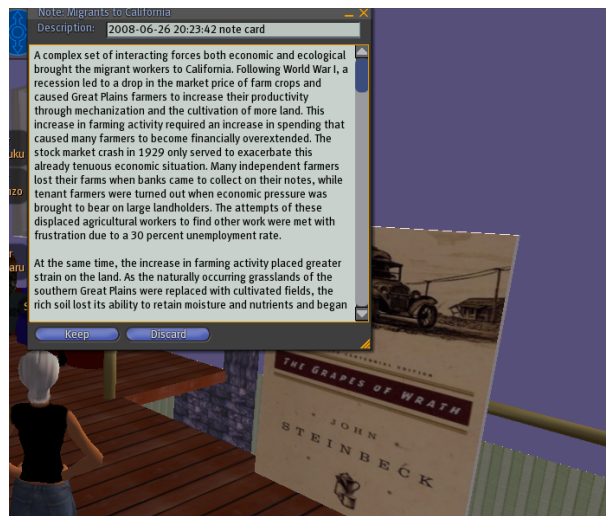
Leaving my avatar, hopefully looking engaged in the discussion, I opened Outlook and found an email containing a list of links for the book discussions. These links contained SLurls, *Second Life Uniform Resource Locators* which open in your browser and locate the area you want in

Second Life. Clicking the teleport button on the SLurl page showed me where I wanted to be. This raised the issue of the correct way to leave a virtual room. Should I get up and casually walk out? Should I apologise first? Second Life seemed to be an environment where avatars come and go so at ease so I vanished; but it still felt bad mannered to leave in that way.



This time I arrived directly at the workshop for the Grapes of Wrath. There was not only a seminar but an additional exhibition of Selected American Authors' 'noteworthy novels published in the US from 1929 to 1941'.

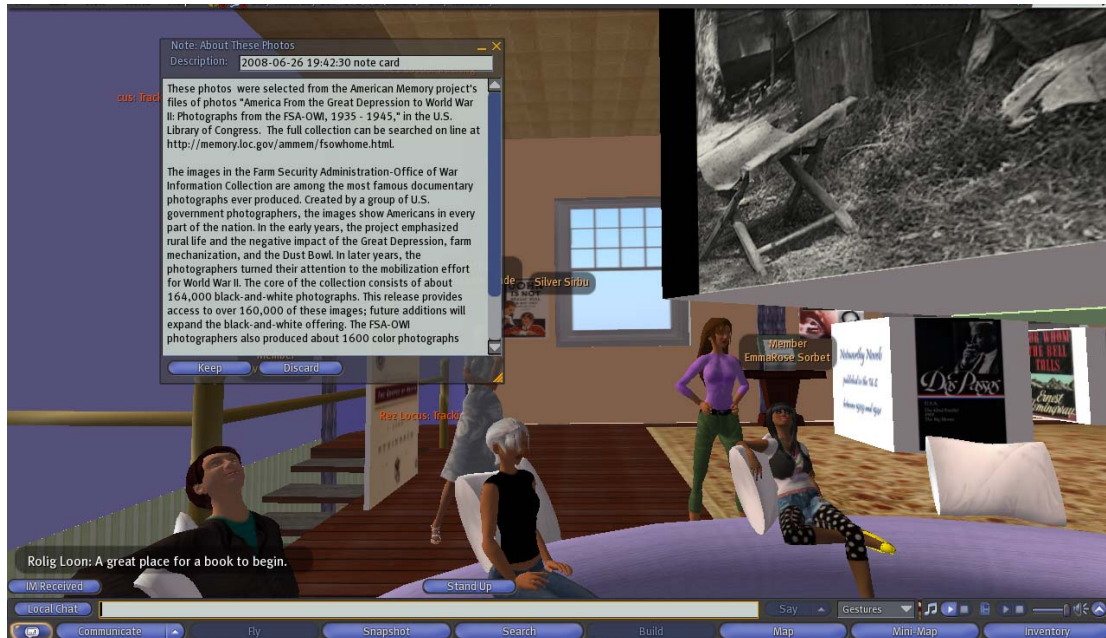
The workshop had started but some avatars were wandering around looking at the exhibits. Using the movement controls and the camera's angles to pan, tilt and zoom, it was possible to walk around the floor cubes and across to the pictures on the wall.



Right clicking any of these gave you a note card containing additional information which you could discard or keep in your inventory for later. I took a seat and joined the workshop. Four cubes hung from the centre of the ceiling. As they slowly spun around, each one revealed a mixture of text and archive images. Controlling your camera angle enabled you to pan and zoom around the display

while still sitting. Right clicking on each panel brought up additional note cards.

I was surrounded by sources of information and the need to multi task was evident. There were text and images on the screen; each one with note cards attached. There were links out to additional sources such as *Historical links to American Magazines of the 1930's* and *Biographical links to authors of the 1930's*.



There were the conversations between the tutor and other participants. I couldn't record these; or make notes as in a traditional RL seminar; to follow them requires reading the screen. There were also all the other avatars each with a representation of their own individuality; for example the smoke rings which blew across the room every few seconds.



Where else can you smoke in public these days?
At the end of the seminar as in any Real Life situation, there was a round of applause. I wanted to clap but when I looked in my list the only gesture was the hula. I didn't know where that had come from, and it didn't seem appropriate for this occasion, so I did nothing.

A sudden increase in activity signified avatars starting to leave, although rather than leaving by the door they were standing up, stretching out their arms and flying upwards through the ceiling. Joining them, I navigated my way back to *The Amp* for the Author lecture

Author Lecture

10:00 a.m. - 10:45 (SLT)



Back in *The Amp* an additional screen had appeared; it had the look and feel of a traditional lecture environment.

The title was *Using Virtual Worlds to make Literature come Alive* by Kim Rufer-Bach (Kin Anubis in SL). It was aimed at those interested in using a 3D virtual world for publicising and promoting their own subject areas and demonstrated a variety of 'screens' containing opportunities for

interaction. The sound quality was reasonable and the graphics excellent but it was still very much a passive experience when Second Life can offer so much more.



Break

10:45 - 11:15 a.m. (SLT)

There followed a thirty minute break to take care of "real-world" responsibilities listed in the programme as "lunch, email or to visit and network with other participants". In reality it was a welcome chance for the laptop to cool down and to give tired eyes a rest.

Guided Field Trips

11:15 a.m. - Noon (SLT) Field Trip 1

Noon - 12:45 p.m. (SLT) Field Trip 2

This part of the conference enabled participants to travel around various locations in Second Life related to Literature and experience the work being done to bring literature alive. The areas were:

- Imagination Island and its Secret Garden
- Tintern Abbey
- Second Life Literacy Foundation
- Alice's Looking Glass
- Only Yesterday
- Dante's Inferno and Linden Hills



I tried to fit in more than two trips. My first location was the *Second Life Literacy Foundation* where I visited an interactive library. In the Tolstoy section I chose *War and Peace* which you could listen to a chapter at a time. There were text books on display such as *Peter Rabbit* and *Alice in Wonderland* where you could turn the pages.



Leaving the Library I visited *Imagination Island and its Secret Garden* to be confronted with a real dilemma within Second Life which is the sheer size and volume of information it contains.

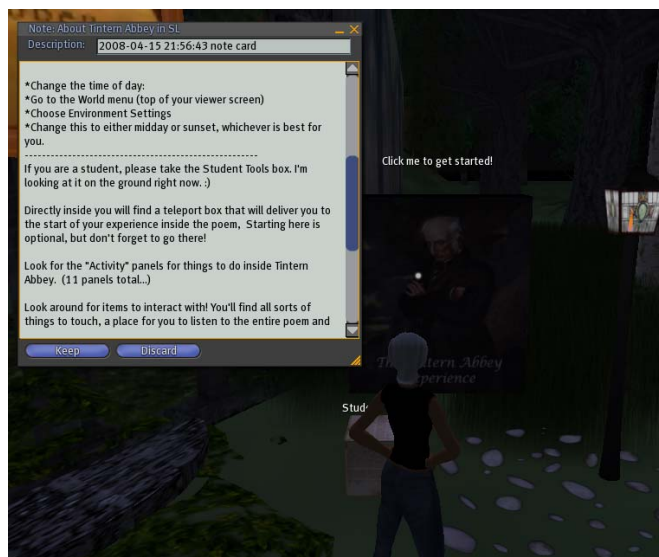


Here there were no less that 11 areas that I could teleport to. I chose *Mythica* and found the entrance to *Masterpieces of American Folk Art*.



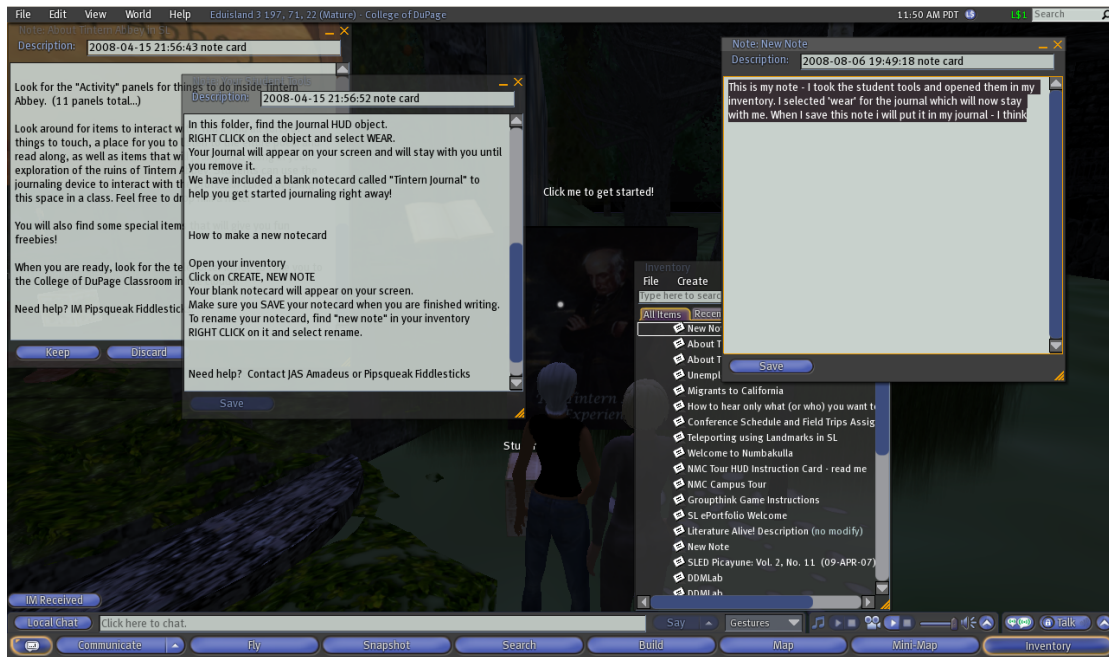
By now I'd been online for three hours; the laptop was getting uncomfortably hot and my eyes were sore. This is the most time I'd spent in Second Life which made me wonder about the viability of participation in a full eight hour event.

I declined the American Folk Art exhibition and teleported to Tintern Abbey, expecting to arrive in the geographical location in Wales but found instead that I was inside the poem. It was night time and there was a useful instruction *Click me to get started*. I was given a note card which told me to take the *Student Tools Box* containing the teleport which would take me to the start of the experience.



The Tools folder also contained a journal object which I was instructed to 'wear' and would stay with me on the journey. It contained a blank note card to write on and instructions on how to save the notes into it. I was now recording my experience within Second Life using Second Life tools. As I teleported into the poem I found myself on a hillside surrounded by audio clips of lines from the poem.

The time I spent in the *Second Life Literacy Foundation* and *Imagination Island and its Secret Garden* had eaten away into my allotted time at Tintern Abbey. There were a range of learning opportunities which I wanted to try when a voice told me I had five minutes left in this location before it was time to move on.



Seeing the avatar of my orientation tutor from the previous night, I sent an instant message asking where I should go next. I was told my name wasn't on the list so I could go where I wanted. I chose *Dante's Inferno and Linden Hills* and, feeling more confident with navigating around, used the SLurl to teleport there. There was no one around and no sign of anything



happening, except for the open pages of my journal which were still attached to me. I switched to map view. In Second Life avatars are represented on the map by green circles; this can be a useful indication if there are other users around but in this case there was no one. So I decided to leave and teleport to *Only Yesterday*.



This was representation of a migrant camp in the 1930s similar to one described in the *Grapes of Wrath*. The camp had been constructed from archive photos and historical accounts so you were immersed in the world of the book. An authentic farmhouse had been recreated and there were note cards to collect, a collection of audio files recounting experiences of life in the Depression and folk songs to listen to as

well as slide shows to watch. This was a fully immersive experience which portrayed the social and cultural life of the times; I could watch archive images, listen to first hand accounts of what it was like to live through the Depression and walk around a 3D environment as though it were a living museum. The next day after the conference I could still see in my mind the stark black and white images and hear the individual voices. The combination of documentary evidence and 21st century 3D animation was a powerful learning tool; one which should not be underestimated.



Summary Panel Discussion

1:00 p.m. – 2:15 p.m. (SLT)

Participants were called back to *The Amp* to discuss their experiences. By now the virtual conference centre was starting to feel like more familiar territory but I had been online for over five and a half hours; the sound quality in the discussion was not good and I decided the time had come to leave.



Conclusion

Stepping into Literature was an international conference in a surreal environment; but there was a real sense of shared interest; not only in the subject matter of US literature but also in the reality of experiencing a virtual world.

It was a powerful learning event which worked on a variety of levels; including the experience of interaction online, the construction of a virtual identity, the visual quality of the virtual landscapes and the immersion into a reconstruction of a historically accurate event.

While it centred on the use of 21st century technology, the images that stayed with me were the faces and voices of the migrant workers from the 1930's. The concept of Second Life would be incomprehensible to them yet it served to tell their story well and at the end of the event it was the reality of their lives which outshone the virtual reality of the environment in which they were so incongruously placed.

Second Life is worth consideration. There are issues around the technology but the strength of this 3D virtual environment is its capacity to offer a fully immersive experience. Users are encouraged to interact with a simulated environment that poses real life problems and scenarios. The pedagogical value of Second Life is that it moves away from the passive nature of the lecture or the book and supports active engagement and involvement in the subject matter. For a generation known collectively as digital natives, there may be real advantages in using technology to stimulate interest where more traditional teaching and learning methods fail.

The best way of assessing the value of a virtual reality world is to try it out; don't take my word for it, go to www.secondlife.com and experience some online encounters for yourself.

Resources

Stepping into Literature was a collaborative event; the websites for the main organisers are listed below:

- <http://www.steppingintohistory.org/index.html>
- <http://www.3dfieldtrips.org/>
- [Learning Times](#)

Locations in the *Stepping into Literature* conference

- The Only Yesterday migrant camp
<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Only%20Yesterday/183/101/30>
- The Only Yesterday reading room
<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Only%20Yesterday/128/128/35>
- Tintern Abbey <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Eduisland%203/197/71/23>
- Second Life Literacy Foundation Library
<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Illumination%20Island/128/128/25>

To find out more about the educational use of Second Life visit:

- Second Life Education Blog <http://www.sl-educationblog.org/>
- Second Life Education Wiki
http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki

The most comprehensive overview of UK Higher Education use of Second Life in in the Eduserve snapshot series. The latest snapshot for May 2008 is available at <http://www.eduserve.org.uk/upload/foundation/sl/uksnapshot052008/final.pdf>

To visit UK University Second Life areas try:

- The University of Leicester Media Zoo
<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Media%20Zoo/170/150/17>
- Coventry University <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Coventry%20University/140/147/137/>

To see Second Life without visiting try YouTube

- Ohio University Second Life Campus
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFuNFRie8wA&feature=related>
- New Media Consortium (MNC)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9VZKTT6gZ8&feature=related>