A virtual presence: Creating connections through Second Life

Rachel Crease, Lyn Hay, Bob Pymm
School of Information Studies
Charles Sturt University
Wagga Wagga NSW Australia

Background

- **CSU SIS dominates library education provision in Australia**

- **Large faculty, range of specialisations, 100 subjects (all distance education)**

- **Review of faculty and curriculum in 2009-10 resulted in new courses, and online delivery**

- **Designed to improve student experience, reduce attrition, consolidate position in the LIS education market place**

DE: facing the challenges

- **DE suits our student profile**
- **Fits with CSU commitment to regional education**
- **But entails challenges**
  - **Communication difficulties**
  - **Lack of student motivation**
  - **High drop out**
  - **Supporting students at a distance**
  - **Student isolation, lack of community**

Creating connections

- **Need to build connections, increase student engagement**
- **OLE provides opportunities to exploit affordances of educational technology and social networking**
- **Student-centred curriculum enables active and collaborative learning**
- **OLE helps address two major issues: amount of reading required, and lack of communal student experience**

Students now read, listen .....

... let us save what remains: not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of copies, as shall place them beyond the reach of accident (Thomas Jefferson, 1791, quoted on the CLOCKSS website).

Preservation (or conservation) is often, but not always, part of the collection managers responsibility. Preservation is necessary because materials that come into the library or archive do not remain in pristine condition:

- paper-based materials undergo chemical deterioration and become brittle and crumble. Poor quality paper and newsprint materials do this quite quickly;
- items are misused and mishandled;
- audiovisual items get scratched, jammed in machines, broken, or become unusable due to format obsolescence; and/or
- digital data becomes corrupted or unstable, or no longer readable due to hardware and/or software upgrades, or, if it is on the internet, it may simply disappear. While books do go out of print, a copy somewhere can usually be found BUT already thousands if not millions of websites and computer files are irretrievably lost, with whatever consequence that may have for the preservation of the records of humanity.

While the preservation problems posed by print and audiovisual materials remain important and should not be overlooked, the issues relating to digital resources are receiving most attention at present.

In addition, in a separate but related activity, there are two fundamental reasons, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, why libraries and archives digitise physical materials:

- to improve access to information, and
- to preserve existing sources of information.

Read

This BBC news article, British Library warns UK web heritage could be lost.

Listen

Listen to the Week 11 mini lecture given by Bob Pymm about preservation and digitisation of resources.

..... watch, interact

Consider

What impact do you think the internet has had on the information cycle? How does this affect the traditional information agencies and their role? To answer these questions think about the following:

- Does it make a difference if the creator, publisher and distributor of information is the same person? That is, is it still a cycle?
- Are there still consumers of the information and, if so, has the way they use information changed?
- Does the fact that more information is available "free" on the internet mean that the role of authorised agencies (libraries, archvies etc) has lessened - or, simply, changed? Why or why not?

For further investigation ...

Watch

Clay Shirky's talk on your tube titled *How cognitive surplus will change the world* (13:39) in which he explores how digital technology combined with human generosity enables people to collaborate in the sharing of information.

Clay Shirky: How cognitive surplus will change ...

… and network

... some participate in the SIS Second Life Learning Centre

… where they meet, discuss, debate, role play

in groups

or one-to-one

... professional development, excursions

… and socialize

they also present assignments

The study

- **Aim – to evaluate and compare student perceptions before and after their Second Life experience**

- **14 undergraduate, 8 postgraduate enrolled in 'Preservation of Information Resources', one lecturer, one tutor**

- **Most students Australian, 2 from elsewhere, range of cultural backgrounds**

- **High level of anxiety about using Second Life**

The task

- **All students attended subject-related lectures and Second Life training session**

- **Major assessment task: a slide presentation followed by discussion**

- **Other students expected to be the 'audience', interact, ask questions and comment**

- **Marks to be awarded for content and presentation style, not technical ability**

Evaluation

- **Students asked to express expectations about Second Life on the discussion board early in the semester, before their experience**

- **Feedback on the Second Life experience gathered from the end of session subject survey**

- **Pre-Second Life, all post grad students responded, and half under-grad students**

- **Post-Second Life, few direct responses to survey, but more anecdotal responses**

Before

- **Students who attended training had little trouble negotiating the SL environment**

- **All students presented their assignments and attended at least one lecture**

- **Comments before indicated they were interested but nervous:**
'Second Life is completely new to me, but I am looking forward to the task …'
'… experiencing some trepidation about Second Life …'

After
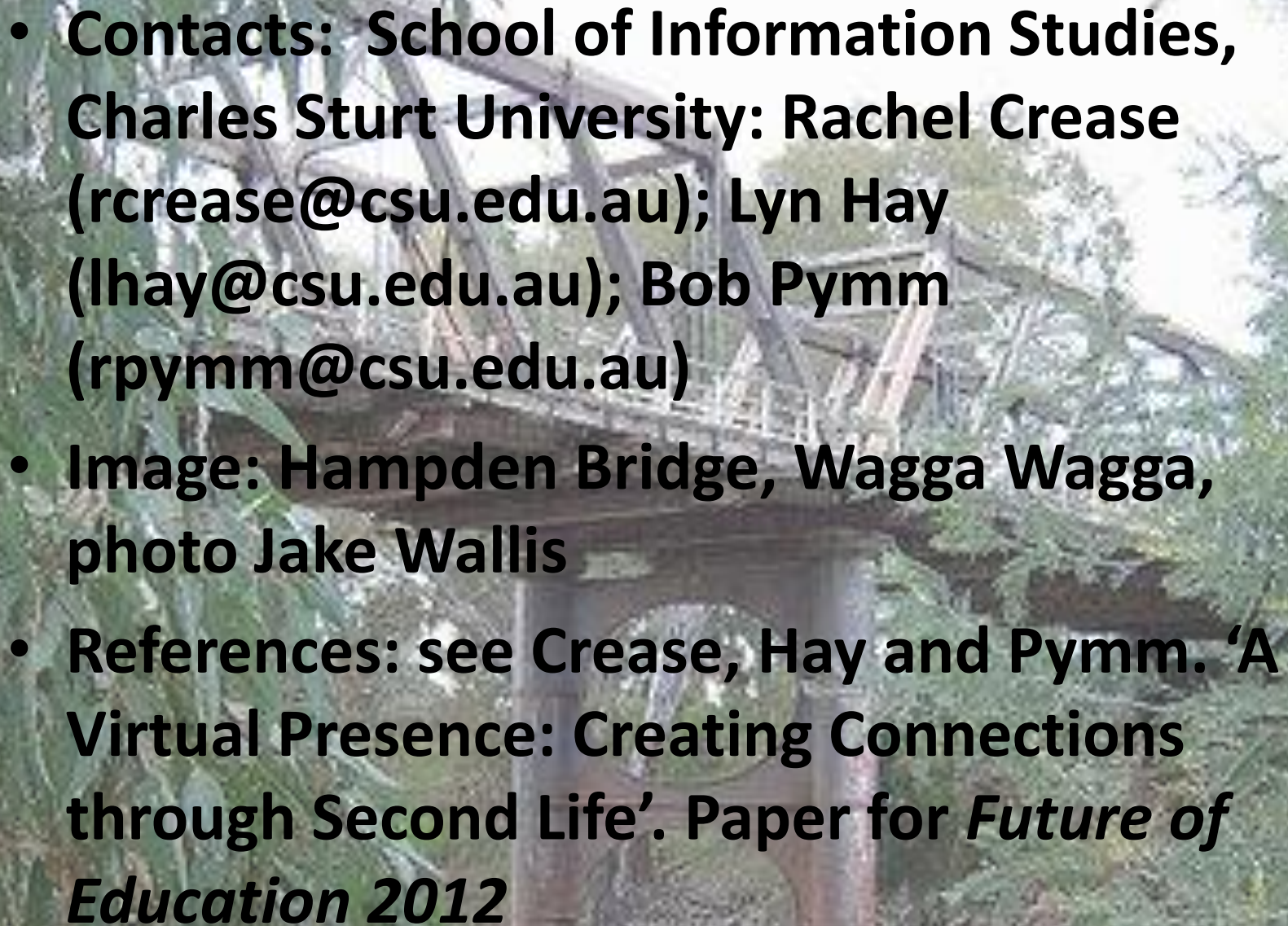
- **All but one direct comments positive**
  … Initially I was dubious … however, it proved a very valuable learning experience …
  … more interaction with the lecturer than I have traditionally experienced …
  … I have a few friends on Second Life now …

- **One student not convinced, noting that** *despite being good to hear other students,* **the expense of buying headphones and problems connecting** *caused them stress …*

Challenges

- **Steep learning curve, two students did not attend training, this caused problems for them**

- **Needs a fair amount of commitment, time and mind, from staff and students if it is to work**

- **Can be hard for students who don't have good internet or fast computer**

Outcomes

- **SL can provide an effective learning space**
- **Initial anxieties common but not surprising**
- **Training program built confidence and proficiency**
- **Presentation was straightforward for most**
- **Low response rate after, but almost all positive**
- **Conversations 'in world' support the view that Second Life increases student engagement and interaction**

- **Contacts: School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University: Rachel Crease (rcrease@csu.edu.au); Lyn Hay (lhay@csu.edu.au); Bob Pymm (rpymm@csu.edu.au)**

- **Image: Hampden Bridge, Wagga Wagga, photo Jake Wallis**

- **References: see Crease, Hay and Pymm. 'A Virtual Presence: Creating Connections through Second Life'. Paper for *Future of Education 2012***