

A conversation with Larry Gillick

Lost Eyeballs, Hyper-Local Super-Niche Content, and the Digital Future

by Pollywog Gardenvale



In this interview, Larry Gillick discusses the origin of the Newseum project, and the challenges and opportunities ahead as the news industry prepares to embrace the “next media.”

Larry Gillick is Assistant Professor of Digital & Broadcast Media/Arts Communication at Shenandoah University in Virginia and a former reporter and anchor for U.S. Armed Forces Television. He is currently working on his Master of Fine Arts degree in Digital Cinema.

Larry Gillick: So what can I tell ya?

Pollywog Gardenvale: Well, I had a nice visit with Beth and Echo last week and they gave me the grand tour of the Second Life Newseum. But I really want to get a feel for the events that led up to the project.

Larry Gillick: Sure! How’s the project going? Is it done?

Pollywog Gardenvale: They are just putting the final, final touches on it, and it’s beautiful. You know, the quality of their work is just tremendous—not everyone would appreciate that fact. It’s really very elegant.

Larry Gillick: That’s true. And in fact there are people in Second Life who—I almost hate to say it, but—wouldn’t appreciate the amount of work that went into it because they are more abstract in their thinking. Some people don’t like replication, but I think it’s a great use. It’s going to be fantastic.

Pollywog Gardenvale: You know how people are always coming and going in Second Life. There have been some high profile companies that come in to experiment for awhile and then leave. It seems that many of them basically create an elaborate container and then try to find content to put into it. But with the Newseum, we have the opposite situation because they’ve got the goods. And they also don’t seem to have the same burden of proof hanging over their heads—like an ROI—to prove that the project is financially viable.

Larry Gillick: I’m not currently working with the Newseum, so I don’t want to speak for them, but my impression has always been that it’s not so much about a financial return as it is to make sure that it’s as professional as is humanly possible. And I think they manage to pull that off really well.

Pollywog Gardenvale: So can you tell me how this project came about? I found this excerpt from a discussion you had:

“I thought that since Glenn Luther and I (with a nudge from Wendell Cochran) first conceived the Newseum project, I might share the article before someone else pops it onto the list. Paul Sparrow, BTW, has run

point throughout the project’s timeframe from the Newseum. The development team of EB Creations does gorgeous work.”

Larry Gillick: Oh, that was the SLED group. The Second Life Educator’s Group.

Pollywog Gardenvale: So were you just tossing around ideas?

Larry Gillick: Basically, it all started at American University with a grad student named Glenn Luther. He had kind of a hybrid set of work—studying part journalism, part photography, and part cinema—and would bounce ideas off me. One day he was telling me about this Second Life thing and was burning some time on it. And we came up with this idea to try using the platform to experiment with how people interact with news media.

You have these people who are like “lost eyeballs” in the news industry—basically, anybody who is playing video games is not watching the news. It could be anything from Grand Theft Auto to one of the Sim Cities—it doesn’t matter. If they’re in some kind of VR space or persistent—or not persistent—world, they’re not interacting with news. But advertisers don’t care. Advertisers don’t need to advertise in newspapers. They’ll advertise anywhere. They’ll sell you Nike sneakers in-world. They’ll put Nissan cars inside video games. So we wondered if we could figure out how people would interact with real-world content, sort of intruding on the VR space. And that was the idea.

So we went to my boss, Wendell Cochran with this concoction. He was, at the time, director of the journalism program there. We bounced this idea off of him and said, “we need a way to put content into Second Life without stealing it. We need to find news—or a newspaper to partner with—someone who can hook us up. And he said, “you know, we have really good contacts at the Newseum. Why don’t we just call them? They have access to all the news in the world.” And that’s only a slight exaggeration because they have a phenomenal pipeline of news—especially headlines from around the world.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Oh yes, I saw

that exhibit. It's like the world's largest newsstand!

Larry Gillick: Bingo!

Now my thing was never to be a Second Life developer—but I did want to see how people would deal with the space.

For all the great things a VR space, or persistent world space can be, you really have to be connected to use it. I no longer work with American University, and am now at Shannandoah University in Virginia. I'm a bit more physical these days. I do a lot of face-to-face human interaction in my gig, so I'm not Second Life-ing as much. In fact, I haven't been actively working on that for quite some time.

I don't think they ever did implement the ideas I had for tracking people, because what I wanted to have in the space was a way to study how people interact with the news. I wanted to know how long people remain around the news, what kind of interaction they have with the news, and be able to study them without having to sit there with my avatar. I want to know, did they read it? That's really what's important from my end of the business. I'm not sure if that matters so much to the Newseum, but I have to tell you, we really had to pitch this idea to the Newseum executives—I probably left that part out of the story here—we didn't just walk into the Newseum and get them to fund this.

Pollywog Gardenvale: That was my next question!

Larry Gillick: Well, at first we pitched the research idea. Although academics and research are not necessarily useful when it comes to journalism. There's a reporter who I dare not name at the *New York Times* who once put it to me this way: He tells all his students and his junior reporters to read everything. Read the research journals, read the medical research. Read *The Lancet*. Read anything you can get your hands on, but don't waste your time with communication journals because there's nothing in there that's going to help. If you're an engineer, you read the engineering journal. If you're a physicist, you read the physics journals. There's cutting-edge research being done every day in all these fields—and then there's us. What do we really hand back to the industry? When was the last time we did serious research that said how we can sell more newspapers, or deliver better content, or write better stories? OK, maybe it's out there, but there's not a whole lot of it, considering all the pages that are

written in these other journals.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Was the executive team at the Newseum initially receptive to the idea, or did you have to really sell it to them?

Larry Gillick: Well, we didn't at first picture building the whole Newseum inside Second Life. That idea came later and we said, "what if we could take this whole new construction project and build it inside Second Life?"

Have you seen pictures of the actual Newseum?

Pollywog Gardenvale: Oh yes!

Larry Gillick: Although it's not open yet.

Pollywog Gardenvale: It's scheduled to open April 11th and they're timing the formal launch of the Second Life build to coincide with the grand opening. But from what I understand, they are planning a soft launch in Second Life soon.

Larry Gillick: That's good to make sure the giant invasion of outside media doesn't crush it all of a sudden. Because that will happen the instant they make the first announcement. If enough people show up at once, it'll be a lag farm.

Pollywog Gardenvale: There has been a real influx of news organizations into Second Life lately.

Larry Gillick: They all don't necessarily get it, though.

Pollywog Gardenvale: There are a handful of interactive agencies that seem to handle most of these builds. Many companies spend a whole lot of money to launch a presence in Second Life. And so often—probably more so in the past—the build is tied to some specific event or promotion, but without any real long-range plan. So eventually the reality sets in that you can have only forty—maybe eighty—avatars in single area at any one given time, depending on where the region borders fall. And of course, then there's the fact that nobody's really making any money, so then they leave.

Larry Gillick: Right... and then there is this shell left over behind them. I remember the opening of NBC—they opened, what—twelve sims simultaneously? And they were all mirrored off each other and pulling in, like Anche Chung Real Estate and others I can't even remember. It was a great looking build for about an hour.

Pollywog Gardenvale: And then everybody's off to the next thing.

Larry Gillick: There was no plan. They

weren't pushing media into it. So that is what will be different with this project because The Newseum has all this media. We could push it all in and have regularly updated news pages with rotating displays and exhibits that change every six months, and maybe even a concierge with a real human being behind it. We thought this would work and so we pitched the whole idea as a package. Part of it was to get the Newseum execs to realize that there is this next media. But who knows? Maybe it will be only video games... maybe it really won't be terribly useful... just because it works in science fiction doesn't mean it has to work in real life.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Other museums are starting to use virtual world technology, as well. It's the natural next step for interactive exhibits. I think that museums in general are pretty progressive about using new technology.

Larry Gillick: One of my former students now writes interactive kiosk software for The National Zoo. It's great stuff! But again, I'm not sure that it would work necessarily as well on the Second Life platform. Maybe there could be little VRMLs inside web pages—I don't know. All I know is that it's a great experiment and we should try it!

Pollywog Gardenvale: Second Life is really just the first of many virtual worlds to become viable.

Larry Gillick: Maybe there will be some open source solution that really wins—I mean, *really* open source.

Pollywog Gardenvale: What seems to be hot right now are the browser-based 3D or 2.5D environments.

Larry Gillick: That are just plug 'n play.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Yes. Some of them are Flash-based. They're more accessible.

Larry Gillick: Everybody knows the browser. They don't need to do a giant download. They don't have to quit on Tuesdays or whenever...

Pollywog Gardenvale: Well now that leads us to the next question. I was reading your profile...

Larry Gillick: Oh dear! Which profile did you read?

Pollywog Gardenvale: Oh, I don't know. Just one I dug up somewhere... But I read that in the early 90s you were working with database technology.

Larry Gillick: Sure, that was database

journalism.

Pollywog Gardenvale: So much has changed since then, and you have been in a good position to watch it evolve. Do you think the journalism establishment—or the powers that be—are inclined to embrace new technology or do they resist it? Do they tend to be early adopters or foot draggers?

Larry Gillick: Now that's an interesting question. They're not early adopters, but I'm not sure I'd call them foot draggers, either. Because I don't know them, I'm basing this on hearsay and other unfair technique, and also by watching their corporate behaviors. My impression is that it behaves like a mature industry that wants to get all the value out of what has already been built.

If you have a car factory, you want to use that factory until the walls fall down—unless you can think of a more efficient way to use your resources. That's the genius part. And then if you can figure out a way to sell the thing, at just the point where you're no longer gaining back that payoff—well, then you sell.

But what do we do with news? We have this thing—this news. Reporters go out and get content and bring it back. And how do people receive that news? Maybe five of them will get it through Second Life, but millions will get it through a newspaper.

Pollywog Gardenvale: So how do you view the future of the newspaper as a method of delivery? Do you still subscribe to a newspaper? Do you still read a newspaper in the morning?

Larry Gillick: I haven't subscribed to a newspaper in years. But my wife periodically renews subscriptions to Sunday papers because she likes the coupons.

Pollywog Gardenvale: I love newspapers! Even though I stopped reading our local paper a few years ago, I couldn't bring myself to end my subscription until just this past year. So they just kept on coming and they'd pile up. Then every week I'd sneak them out to the trash can. I felt so guilty—that was a secret between me and the trash man. But of course, I read it all online. And so now they're calling me on the phone—like I broke up with a lover. They say, "Oh, what can we do to get you back?"

Larry Gillick: You know Roy Peter Clark over at the Poynter Institute? He wrote in a column a few months ago that

we really need to, as news people, subscribe to newspapers because it's our business and we need to be reading them.

Pollywog Gardenvale: That's a very good point.

Larry Gillick: But it'll never happen.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Everything's online and we're past the point of no return.

Larry Gillick: So what do you think of digital paper?

Pollywog Gardenvale: Oh, that's an exciting development! Maybe that will eventually bring back the morning paper. I think things may eventually come back around full circle. I hope that eventually there will be a return to formats that are more visually appealing—something more like a printed publication, but in electronic form. Maybe a pdf on steroids, or something. We've



lost so much of the visual appeal with the current generation of websites—they're all functional, database-driven stuff.

Larry Gillick: Oh sure, it's all content management systems—no art layout designed by a person.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Right. But I think it will swing back the other way, eventually. There will be some breakthrough technologies that will make it more practical to enjoy the presentation, as well as the content.

Larry Gillick: There's some good news on that front. You get folks like Lynn Perry, who may still be teaching at American University, and some other award-winning designers have been putting together some really decent and easy to read, attractive layouts for some of the bigger newspapers. I think she may have worked on the *USA Today* redo. Also *The New York Times* redesigned their online edition a year ago or so, and it's twice as good as before. But I still don't like the way they experiment with online advertising. Sometimes they have the weirdest interactive ads that are sort of fall asleep and then wake up on you.

Pollywog Gardenvale: And then there are the ones that follow you around and you just want to smack 'em!

Larry Gillick: Yeah, you're an ad! Go

away!

I said some things about executives a moment ago, but I want to balance that out by saying that I've done some work with an organization the past couple of years. You probably know Gannett, the largest newspaper chain in America and owners of *USA Today*? They rock.

Now, they have had a reputation for years of being, shall we say, "kindly frugal," and for getting the most out of all their resources, and also for not necessarily being 100% connected to the digital universe. Well, this institution at every level recognizes that there is a digital future and that the paper-based, or even television-based, (because they also own some TV stations) news universe is absolutely changing around them. So they have a plan—and I can't tell you about the plan, because it's partly a secret. But they do have a plan. So when they send reporters out to the field, they are gathering news for their online product first. They're thinking first, "I need to get news," and then they're saying, "now I need to turn it into an article for the paper"—in that order. I just love that!

I haven't talked to any other executives lately—I've only been listening to the Gannett folks, but boy! I hear them talk and I think that maybe some people might not like the idea that they're investing, or thinking for awhile, or studying the issues, or training their employees in new things, because maybe it doesn't have an immediate return on investment... but I'll tell you what. They're going to get it in the long run. Gannett will solve this one. Gannett will crack this nut by focusing on their readership, and the sort of local—or hyper-local newspapers—even if they are online. There will be this hyper-local content and super-niche marketing—like their "Moms" sites. I like IndyMoms.com which is for moms in the Indianapolis area. And moms love to talk! So if you're pregnant and need advice, you can go online and find other moms who will say, "hey! I had that very same kind of morning sickness!" And then they raise their kids together, and it's community. And they have other sites—I'm just using the Moms site as an example because that was such a sure-fire winner from the get-go. Honestly, great people, good organization.

Pollywog Gardenvale: Well, on that note, I'd like to thank you for a most interesting conversation!

Larry Gillick: If you're up for more conversation, I'm happy to help, anytime! ☿