

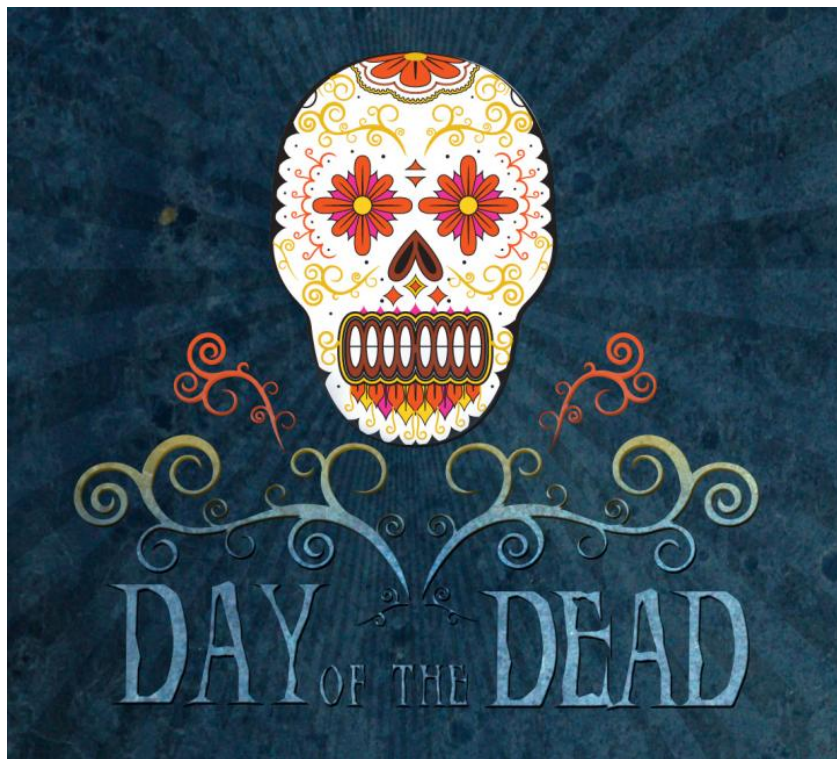
AUDIENCE OPINIONS: THE DAY OF THE DEAD FESTIVAL AND SMITHSONIAN LATINO VIRTUAL MUSEUM IN SECOND LIFE

Visitor: It felt more comfortable [building an altar in Second Life]. You know in real life those of us who are caught between the two worlds often feel embarrassed at not knowing as much as we and others feel we should about our culture. Here I can be an expert to those who don't know anything and learn in a supportive way from those who do.


Visitor: We're nicer here than in RL[real life] lol [laughing out loud]

Visitor: More tolerant

Visitor: More encouraging



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Office of Policy and Analysis
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Contents

Preface.....	ii
Summary.....	1
The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum.....	1
Study of Visitor Responses to the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Day of the Dead Festival in Second Life	3
Looking Toward the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum’s Future.....	7
The Bigger Picture	11
Introduction.....	13
The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum.....	13
Purpose of the Study	18
Methodology	19
Findings.....	21
Appeal of the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum During the Day of the Dead Festival	21
Experiences	24
Responses to the Day of the Dead Festival.....	28
The Festival’s Events	41
Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Set-Up During the Day of the Dead Festival	55
Appendix A: Content Providers and Participating Organizations	65
Appendix B: Assessment Instruments	68
Appendix C: Survey Form.....	73

Preface

The Day of the Dead Festival, presented in Second Life's (SL) virtual 3D space, focused on learning about and identification with an annual Latino celebration through multiple experiences, including games, storytelling, workshops, poetry readings, a marionette performance, altar building, a traditional Day of the Dead procession, and literary and musical events such as poetry readings and live performances.

The Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC), which developed the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum (SLVM) that "hosted" the Day of the Dead Festival, asked the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a study of visitors' interests in experiencing cultural, artistic, and heritage activities via a platform and what their responses were to the Festival and the SLVM space in SL.

The creators of SLVM and the Festival developed an intelligent and creative site that incorporates social, learning, and entertainment activities through a series of techniques, including interactive art, live presentations, engaging games, scavenger hunts, workshops, and other programming. The OP&A study team accompanied the development of SLVM and is aware of the specialized skills and use of technologies employed to develop, launch, and operate the complex site. Challenges of presenting and interpreting "heritage," the importance of selecting activities around stimulating themes, the multiplicity of high-quality products, and the availability of a huge variety of content merit appreciation and respect for those who have contributed to the effectiveness of the site, optimized its contributions, and experimented with new approaches and rapidly changing technologies.

This study revealed that visitors were very pleased with the Festival and engaged in a number of cultural experiences in a colorful, picturesque setting. Of particular importance to them, they were able to engage on their own terms. Although there were challenges such as some visitors lacking adequate technology or experience with how to use a virtual environment, the site is likely to draw increasing numbers of visitors and enhance the reputation of the Smithsonian.

To evaluate the responses of visitors, OP&A identified several experienced analysts, led by Ioana Munteanu, Andrew Pekarik, Sarah Block, Richard Serdici, and Bethany Miller. After designing an assessment instrument, observation forms, and interview guides, their avatars observed and interviewed visitors' avatars. Data analysis was performed by Ioana Munteanu, Andrew Pekarik, and Richard Serdici. Whitney Watriss helped edit the report, and James Smith reviewed the summary. I thank them and their avatars for their wholehearted efforts, expertise, experience, and knowledge.

I also wish to thank Melissa Carrillo, SLVM's driving force. Without her dedication, commitment, and much-needed expertise, the Smithsonian would not have a virtual museum, nor would it gather suggestions about the site's improvement, such as its expansion to other online activities via web 2.0 technologies. Her experiences and evaluations of SLVM and Day of the Dead Festivals in SL are helping others to "leap frog" the stages of innovation in this realm.

Summary

The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum

The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum (SLVM), a relatively new and unique initiative at the Smithsonian, is a virtual online museum model intended to offer immersive education through web 2.0 and web 3.0 technologies. Currently, according to its Creative Director, Melissa Carrillo, the Museum spearheads innovation and education outreach by increasing

- Research
- Program outreach
- Presence, and
- Public visibility for the Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC), SLVM's parent organization.

SLVM started as the virtual counterpart of a physical museum that would bring Smithsonian units together to increase online access to their Latino scholarship. In response to findings from ongoing formative evaluations, the focus of SLVM shifted from content to audiences, and specifically to the delivery of educational experiences for specific audiences using various cutting-edge technologies within the internet and virtual-world framework. Today, SLVM reaches out to an array of audiences—from Latino youth and adults to those from other cultures, virtual-world veterans and first-time visitors, students and professional creators of cultural works, and many others. It is intended to offer a wide range of experiences, including: strengthening and sharing of cultural identity; learning in a rich, educationally immersive environment; engaging in social interactions; and greater understanding and knowledge of Latino heritage by Latinos and others. Audiences also use the museum as a virtual social gathering spot where they attend performances and participate in other events with their friends, meet new people, network, and just hang out.

SLVM does all this through a virtual 3D world that provides immersive and interactive distance learning both in the classroom and through informal learning activities such as scavenger hunts, interactive art, creation of cultural objects, live presentations with audience engagement, and participation in virtual recreations of traditional Latino festivals. In 2011, SLVM is planning to launch a new interdisciplinary 3D role-playing game called *Mi Tierra, Mi Mundo*, where gamers, alone or in teams, will learn about the intricate interconnections among land, water, and cultural ecosystems. In its delivery of Latino cultural, educational, and social experiences, the Museum emphasizes Smithsonian-wide resources and expertise, with attention to interdisciplinary and

multicultural opportunities. Its use of online technologies enables it to reach communities in the United States and abroad on a continuous basis, greatly extending access to Smithsonian resources and collections.

The early years of SLVM of necessity focused on production—the creation of environments, objects, and experience delivery systems to serve the needs and interests of different audiences. Until recently, Second Life (SL) has served as the primary test bed for SLVM. SL is a popular virtual-reality world that allows users to interact with each other and explore the environment through avatars they create. The spaces that users can create within the SL world can simulate real-world ones such as a museum, or can be places bounded only by the imagination of their producers. Over 20 million avatars were registered in SL and 54,000 concurrent avatars populated the SL virtual world in May of 2010¹.

Within SL's virtual 3D space, SLVM was designed as a virtual five-island² ecosystem consisting of a built zone and natural areas of mountains, rivers, and forests where visitors can explore the relationships between culture and the environment, and the sustainability of both. Current features include a simulated plaza, music lounge, church, outdoor and indoor cafés, reinterpreted works of Latino art from Smithsonian collections, and a simulated watershed. Visitors can use the environment in a wide variety of ways, from engaging in an Eco-Explorer Adventure Quest featuring the Olmec Legacy Collection of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) to having a virtual cup of coffee with other avatars.

Because SL is a proprietary platform, educators have sought alternative, open-source virtual worlds that would more directly suit their aims. Prominent among these efforts is the Immersive Education Initiative, a collaboration of educational organizations working together to develop open standards for virtual worlds. SLVM has joined this movement through its partnership with the Grid Institute of Boston College. As a result, SLVM and its products have now moved beyond SL and are available on a number of other virtual-world platforms, where they can be accessible to many more audiences. It is expected that as virtual worlds move into the mainstream of internet offerings with the next generation of web browsers, SLVM will be ready to serve a significantly larger audience than even the millions now registered in SL.

SLVM has also used the internet to make some Museum products and programs available outside of the virtual-world platforms. These include online activities, scholarly resources, and

¹ Source: Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life.

² According to Wikipedia, SL supports “four types of land regions: Mainland, Private Region, Homestead and Openspace. Mainland regions form one continuous land mass, while Private regions are islands.” SLVM owns five “islands.” For more on land ownership visit either http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life#Land_ownership or http://community.secondlife.com/t5/English-Knowledge-Base/Private-Regions/ta-p/700133#Can_I_include_multiple_Regions_in_my_Estate.3F.

opportunities for social interaction via web 2.0 technological tools such as a SLVM blog, YouTube, Facebook, UStream, and Flickr.

SLVM's goals and varied offerings make it well-positioned to support the Smithsonian's 2010-15 strategic plan. It advances the goals of the Grand Challenges of Valuing World Cultures and Understanding the American Experience. SLVM also supports the Grand Challenge of Understanding and Sustaining a Biodiverse Planet with the addition of the SLVM Virtual Watershed project, "a 21st century approach to environmental education using virtual worlds, games, and 3D simulation."³

Study of Visitor Responses to the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Day of the Dead Festival in Second Life

Against this backdrop, SLC asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a study of SLVM's second Day of the Dead Festival and of the SLVM space in SL in which the Festival took place. The five-day event, which ran from October 29 to November 2, celebrated this well-known Latino tradition, which is enjoyed worldwide. The Festival took place in the virtual Museum's "Smithsonian Latino Music" island, with the Placita (the central plaza) serving as the focal point. Activities took place there and in adjacent spaces—including at a community altar and a cemetery that were produced specifically for the Festival. The SLVM team provided the platform and the technical support for implementation of the Day of the Dead Festival. The content that SLVM Creative Director Melissa Carrillo and her staff generated was augmented by the user-generated content.

The Day of the Dead Festival had several target audiences:

- Regular SL users and new visitors who were attracted to SL by their interest in the Festival or SLVM.
- Latino youth reached through partnerships with schools that serve underserved rural and urban Latino communities. Because SL does not allow users below 16 years of age without chaperones, SLVM arranged special times when only these younger visitors could access the Festival's site. (This SL restriction is one reason SLVM is now making its content available through virtual worlds other than SL, such as the Education Grid established by the Immersive Education Initiative.)
- Latino adults, many of them associated with Latino communities and organizations that provided content for the Festival.

³ The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Watershed Project, Interim Report for the Smithsonian 2.0 Fund, December 17, 2010, unpublished document.

Representatives of Latino art and cultural organizations who participated as content providers and as audience members, and who helped build communities and generate interest in SLVM within their organizations, are listed in Appendix A.

The SLC asked OP&A to study audiences' responses to the Day of the Dead Festival and to the SLVM space in SL in which the Festival took place. It is worth noting that although some of the audiences were new to SL, they nevertheless were interested in investing the time to learn and explore new learning experiences using an unfamiliar technology.

At the time, the Festival as a whole was accessible only on the SL platform; some elements were available on the Festival's main website, social media platforms (such as Facebook, the SLVM blog, YouTube, UStream, and Flickr), four physical venues to which activities were streamed from SLVM, and two physical venues from which activities were streamed into SLVM. The study team collected information through interviews with and observation of visitors during the entire period of the Festival.

Through this evaluation, the SLVM staff hoped to:

- Find out what audiences thought worked well and what changes would have enhanced the experiences that SLVM staff hoped participants would have at the Festival, such as community building, social interaction, and learning about Latino culture.
- Test the effectiveness of this SLVM venue and the Festival in representing Latino cultural heritage.
- Test implementation of a distance-learning program model and a Latino youth-outreach model with students at Holy Redeemer Catholic School (25 students) and the SEED School of Maryland (12 students). The distance-learning programming for these schools included an altar-building demonstration and activity, a visual-literacy workshop, and a marionette workshop.
- Test the implementation of a Latino adult-outreach model that involved programming such as an art and literary series with the Rincon Bohemio National Literacy Group and an open mic; recordings of an oral history interview and a concert with Latino icon Lila Downs; a Meso-American ballgame; a traditional Day of the Dead procession; live performances; and a party.

The OP&A study team brought its extensive experience in visitor studies, based on countless studies of visitors in traditional and non-traditional settings, to this work.

Despite the fact that SLVM in SL is a still young endeavor, the study team was struck by the progress made since the first Day of the Dead Festival, and by SLVM's potential for even greater impact in the future. Notable findings include the following:

- **Visitors rated the extent and quality of the offerings highly.** Visitors consistently praised this Festival for its rich content, diversity and number of offerings, successful implementation, engaging presenters, and—especially—opportunities for rich Latino cultural experiences.
- **Audiences were very diverse and geographically broad.** Participants came from throughout the United States and overseas; they were young and old, virtual-world veterans and new users, Latinos and non-Latinos. They included students and teachers at all levels, Latinos interested in finding their roots or expanding on what they already knew, and non-Latinos wanting to explore another culture. They came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and had varying interests.
- **Visitors cited a wide variety of satisfying experiences.** Visitors reported many different kinds of satisfying experiences—a major accomplishment, given the diversity of the audiences. The study team was impressed by the number of interviewees who spoke enthusiastically about some aspect of their visit, and their eagerness to spread the word about SLVM in their various communities. Their experiences included some that SLVM organizers had particularly hoped to see, including: *learning* (the study team was impressed with students’ enthusiasm regarding the novel and immersive educational experiences in SLVM that seemed to carry over to the classroom); *building communities* (both within Latino cultures and between Latino and non-Latino cultures); *exploring* Latino cultures; and having positive *social interactions* (dancing, dating and chatting over a virtual cup of coffee). They also included some surprising experiences—*relaxing* and decompressing; *sharing* personal stories and creative works; *actively participating* in many of the events and offerings; *networking*; *learning* a language; and *exhibiting* their own creative works. Importantly, several people talked about *reusing* what they learned in their everyday lives.
- **The tests of the Latino youth- and adult-outreach models and distance-learning model were successful.** This was evident from the comments of the stakeholders and audiences at which the tests were aimed (two schools, a literary group, and representatives of Latino communities and art and cultural organizations).

Based in part on what visitors said and its own observations, the study team thinks that three key aspects of SLVM and the Festival underlay the positive experiences people came away with:

- The creation of an atmosphere and environment in which people were comfortable sharing aspects of their lives, taking risks, and being who they are. The extent to which people were willing to contribute their own content to the Festival was noteworthy.

- A variety of modes of communication and presentation that allowed people to find ways to engage that matched their styles of learning and participating. (The study team noted a number of visitor comments about personal freedom and the opportunity to engage on their own terms).
- The ability of the virtual world to transcend physical limitations and present a wide range of offerings and modes of presentation, in a single space, that are simultaneously and continuously available around the world, day and night.

As is always the case, not all visitors came away from the Festival and the SLVM in SL space in which it took place well-pleased with their experience, and even those who had an excellent time still sometimes identified things that needed improvement. The issues reported in this study were raised by multiple audience members. Some are the result of the limited resources available for SLVM's production and may be easily solved as additional resources become available. Others can be attributed to visitors' and new avatars' lack of expertise and familiarity with the SL environment, to technical difficulties related to the operating systems required by SL, and to other problems that SLVM staff have limited ability to fix, such as limited access to SL from SI computers due to firewall issues. Within that context of a spectrum of causes, the study team decided to report all challenges raised by audiences, so that the SLVM team has a sense of what mattered to them. It is also important to note that the SLVM staff have already addressed some of the issues. For example, as a result of preliminary feedback from OP&A, SLVM has built in teacher and student training workshops prior to formal events.

Challenges expressed by participants fell into the following groups:⁴

- **Technical difficulties**, including problems with access to SLVM in SL and to specific Festival events (either within SL or through SLVM's other internet channels), which may be one reason for the sparse avatar presence at Festival events; poorly functioning links (e.g., avatars commented that links landed their avatar under water); and sound and computer connectivity issues that took time away from Festival offerings and diminished visitors' overall satisfaction with the Festival in SLVM in SL.
- **Wayfinding difficulties**, such as insufficient directions, incomplete signage, lack of landmarks, and insufficient bilingual signage to Festival events within the SLVM space in SL, which caused visitors in-world navigation problems.
- **Lack of adequate technology among some users.** A powerful computer with the latest software is required for optimal use of SLVM in SL, and users who did not have that equipment experienced some technical frustrations. A particular problem was that some

⁴ Details for these and all other items summarized in this section are available in the main body of the report that follows.

visitors using avatars did not realize that they first had to install QuickTime, which is required to run SLVM videos in SL, and so were unable to access Festival videos. Lack of adequate technology or unfamiliarity with the software also prevented some content providers and audiences from arriving online in time to engage in the Festival's events. This issue is particularly relevant to SLVM's goal of reaching new audiences outside SL, who may not be aware of the computer capacity needed to run the SL platform. Outside of school hours the technology requirements may also impede SLVM from reaching students older than 16 years in underserved rural and urban areas, as well as students in underserved areas in schools whose technology resources are limited.

- **Inexperience with virtual worlds** on the part of presenters, teachers, students, and visitors that required them to spend time learning SL skills rather than focusing on the Festival's offerings.
- **Limited marketing** that resulted in a relatively low number of avatars present for events. The study team believes that there is considerable potential for attracting more members of SL Latino communities and other visitors to SLVM, particularly with themed events such as the Day of the Dead Festival. It also realizes that SLVM has just begun to reach out to school communities, particularly in underprivileged urban communities and rural areas; the two school programs offered during the Festival were pilot efforts.

Looking Toward the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum's Future

As a study of one set of events taking place within a larger work-in-progress, this evaluation has inherent limitations. Many of the recommendations for change can be easily satisfied in the ongoing development of future Day of the Dead Festival offerings of SLVM in SL and similar events, and the suggestions for improvements in marketing, outreach, programming, and technology represent aspirations for what a mature, fully-developed Festival would offer.

Suggestions for improvements of the Festival and SLVM in SL can be classified in a few broad categories:

- Ease of *access*—in terms of the ease with which avatars and website visitors can find or get to the space in which the Day of the Dead Festival took place in SLVM in SL
- More effective *marketing*—to potential audiences within SL as well as other audiences
- *Resolution of technical issues*—especially those related to links
- Advance *training of content providers*—on how to use SL technology

- **Improved wayfinding**—within SLVM in SL, to assist in locating Day of Dead Festival events
- **Enhanced content**—including even more background information on the Day of the Dead Festival and the offerings of SLVM in SL in which it took place, and more opportunities for different experiences.

Drawing on ideas offered by visitors and what the study team observed, the following suggestions are worth considering.

Access

- Provide an easier, better way to get to SLVM from within SL and outside, such as functional links to the Day of the Dead Festival in SLVM in SL, on the SLVM and Day of the Dead Festival websites, as well as on other Day of the Dead Festival web 2.0 platforms (e.g., location-based links for the Day of the Dead Festival in SLVM in SL). Another point visitors made was that at the time of the Festival they had no way of knowing that they had to type “Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum” in the search function.
- Provide an experientially representative overview (e.g., a video) of all Day of the Dead Festival events and of what is available to visitors in SLVM in SL and the space in which the Festival takes place. This should be available at all Day of the Dead Festival web presences for visitors who do not have an avatar, but would like to understand better what it would be like to participate in such an event.
- Have a single Day of the Dead Festival Facebook page for all Festivals, rather than one for each Festival. Distribute and crosslink more (ideally all) of the existing content among appropriate social media sites so that it is available to visitors regardless of their point of web destination.

Marketing

- Increase awareness of SLVM and the Festival and other events in SL by more advertising on event lists and with SL user groups.
- Engage in more outreach
 - To the SL community—and in particular to groups within it that may have a particular interest in the Festival or SLVM, such as Latinos, specific interest

groups (e.g., literary, poetry, music, and education), and other relevant user groups.

- To SL avatars—to build virtual visitation, encourage SLVM advocates within SL to invite new visitors to the Museum, including non-Latinos and people with no affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution.
 - To educational organizations and underserved audiences—increase the number of partnerships (e.g., schools and cultural organizations) that serve Latino youth and/or underserved students.
 - Across Smithsonian units and the broader museum world—promote SLVM, the Day of the Dead Festival, and other events through other Smithsonian units and the broader museum world (the quid pro quo may be to continue to offer them a presence in SLVM/partnering for programming, which might be a very positive thing). Use the experience from existing projects with units such as the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and National Museum of Natural History to reach out to other units or different departments within units—for example, the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s education department, which offers visual literacy workshops. Partnerships with museums across Latin America would enable SLVM to reach additional audiences.
 - Among onsite Smithsonian visitors—for example, by streaming live events in SL to Smithsonian audiences.
- Develop and implement additional ways to use social media to continuously engage SLVM’s networks. For example, implement out-of-the box ideas such as sponsoring contests on a branding design for SLVM, an idea generated by SLVM Creative Director Melissa Carrillo. Other ideas may include offering daily or weekly tips on important events in Latino culture.

Technical Challenges

- Maintain links to avoid non-functioning and malfunctioning links to both web content and locations. Maintenance is a continual challenge, because changes to SL systems and problems with SL servers can have negative impacts on functionality.
- Provide alternative means to access information. For example, since not all avatars have QuickTime installed on their computers to access videos in SLVM in SL, SLVM staff may choose to provide transcripts of the information in the videos, such as a transcript of the oral history interview with Lila Downs.

Training of Content Providers

- Train content providers on the effective use of SL technology in areas such as setting up their computers to make it to their performance; setting up the sound so that echoes do not impede visitors' ability to hear; and using media buttons to access videos.

Wayfinding

- Create better signage and markers to help people find their way around SLVM in SL. Add links on the flags for teleporting to an event and guidance on how to find places.
- Ensure that the map is fully accessible to all avatars regardless of their experience with SL and has properly working teleporting features that take avatars to Day of the Dead Festival events seamlessly from anywhere within SLVM's "Latino Virtual Museum" island where the Festival takes place.
- Use other design mechanisms to guide avatars, such as the marigold path (the path that guided visitors within SLVM in SL during one Festival offering, and which was left there for the entire duration of the Festival).
- Provide more (ideally all) signage in SLVM in SL in both English and Spanish.

Content

- Provide as much Festival content as possible (ideally all of it) in both English and Spanish.
- Provide more and changing exhibits and other offerings at SLVM in SL when special events such as the Day of the Dead Festival are not being held. The study team believes visitors are more likely to return regularly if they know they can find new things to see and experience. For example, SLVM could change the information on late great Latinos featured in the cemetery based on different themes (such as music and literature) and events, (such as birth or death dates of cultural icons). It could allow people to add memorials to their friends and family in one area of the cemetery, or it could host memorials in the cemetery when contemporary Latino icons die. Steps in this direction would address visitors' suggestions that there be more opportunities for engagement.
- Expand the availability of immersive experiences. For example, provide additional demonstrations of Latino traditions like altar building, and offer more freedom for individual creative expression.
- Offer more live events—poetry, music, games, storytelling, and presentations of Latino traditions in weddings, parties, dinners, and the like on a regular basis.

- Host contests on a variety of topics, such as cooking, music, clothing, dance, history, art, and culture.
- Offer more opportunities for social engagement, such as increasing the number of venues and offerings conducive to social interaction—contests, workshops, spaces for sharing creative works, and programs on Latino traditions and culture that allow for participation and discussion with experts and among participants.

Other

- Explore ways other than events during well-known Latino celebrations to allow teachers to use the Festival on a regular basis without special arrangements. For example, to address security concerns, close SLVM in SL and the Festival to all but younger students for a half hour to one hour a week or month so that students can safely visit the site. If teachers know when the SLVM in SL is locked down to other visitors, they can schedule student visits for those times.

The Bigger Picture

Beyond suggestions specific to the Day of the Dead Festival, the study team finds the data collected in this evaluation to be perhaps even more useful for preliminary documentation of what the virtual-reality medium is capable of, and how it differs from what is otherwise available. Three dimensions stand out:

- **Community:** Although virtual worlds superficially seem to emphasize “place” and environment, a vital and primary attraction for the millions of people around the world who engage with them is access to other people. The construction of an avatar is the first step toward identification with a community. Users in SL typically join one or more groups (the current limit is 25) that share their interests and through which they meet and engage with others. This type of direct, personal engagement with like-minded individuals is typically not available to museum visitors or website users. It is unique to virtual worlds. Experimenting with the creation and maintenance of such voluntary virtual communities is potentially a way to better understand how to bring together and motivate parallel communities in real life.
- **Emotion:** One of the most striking features of the responses documented in this report is the extent of positive emotions that users experienced and shared. This was greatly enhanced by the Festival’s emphasis on music, poetry, and stories, including the creations of audience members. Such feelings are at the very heart of cultural understanding. Connecting on a personal, emotional level with the experiences of others, including

people one does not know, provides a level of communication that is more compelling and, for many people, more meaningful than the simple exchange of information that commonly dominates presentations in museums and on websites.

- **Interactivity:** Students in particular were obviously drawn to the interactive aspects of SLVM. This is hardly surprising, as evidence from the real world shows that young people engage more eagerly with activity centers like the National Museum of American History's Spark!Lab than with traditional exhibitions. But while important learning takes place in physically interactive settings, this is not a practical way to reach large numbers in the traditional museum setting. Even at the Smithsonian, decades after the value of such centers have become recognized, there are few such offerings. Virtual worlds, on the other hand, provide a much more practical way of delivering interactive experiences, and they are likely to become an increasingly familiar dimension of formal education in the schools.

For these reasons, among others, the study team believes that SLVM has a promising future, with great potential for reaching large, new audiences and offering a wide range of educational and other experiences that can support the mission of the SLC while blazing a trail for the Smithsonian as a whole. As with any innovative enterprise, missteps and course corrections, along with discoveries and unexpected opportunities, are natural elements in the development process. As is evident from this review of the Day of the Dead Festival, SLVM to date has shown itself capable of growth and improvement at the same time that it points the way to new and exciting possibilities.

Introduction

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SLVM offers access to pan-Smithsonian digital collections, research and scholarship, exhibitions, and educational programming. According to the official SLC website, SLVM features:

the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage's Música del Pueblo: A Smithsonian Virtual Exhibition; the National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology's Smithsonian Olmec Legacy; the Smithsonian Latino Center's own Latino Virtual Gallery; and Latino and Latin American art and archival materials currently in the permanent collections of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Renwick Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, National Museum of American History, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, National Air and Space Museum, and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

⁵ Source: Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Life.

⁶ According to Wikipedia, SL supports “four types of land regions: Mainland, Private Region, Homestead and Openspace. Mainland regions form one continuous land mass, while Private regions are islands.” SLVM owns five “islands.” For more on land ownership visit either http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life#Land_ownership or http://community.secondlife.com/t5/English-Knowledge-Base/Private-Regions/ta-p/700133#Can_I_include_multiple_Regions_in_my_Estate.3F.

Because SL is a proprietary platform, educators have sought alternative, open-source virtual worlds that would more directly suit their aims. Prominent among these efforts is the Immersive Education Initiative, a collaboration of educational organizations working together to develop open standards for virtual worlds. SLVM has joined this movement through its partnership with the Grid Institute of Boston College. As a result, SLVM and its products have now moved beyond SL and are available on a number of other virtual-world platforms, where they can be accessible to many more audiences. It is expected that as virtual worlds move into the mainstream of internet offerings with the next generation of web browsers, SLVM will be ready to serve a significantly larger audience than even the millions now registered in SL.

SLVM has also used the internet to make some Museum products and programs available outside of the virtual-world platforms. These include online activities, scholarly resources, and opportunities for social interaction via web 2.0 technological tools such as a SLVM blog, YouTube, Facebook, UStream, and Flickr.

SLVM's goals and varied offerings make it well-positioned to support the Smithsonian's 2010-15 strategic plan. It advances the goals of the Grand Challenges of Valuing World Cultures and Understanding the American Experience. SLVM also supports the Grand Challenge of Understanding and Sustaining a Biodiverse Planet with the addition of the SLVM Virtual Watershed project, "a 21st century approach to environmental education using virtual worlds, games, and 3D simulation."⁷

Day of the Dead Festival⁸

In 2010, for the second year SLVM hosted a Day of the Dead Festival in SL. The celebration, which ran from Friday, October 29 to Tuesday, November 2, included 25⁹ events. Most of the live events were designed with all audiences in mind and included a wide range of offerings, from more formal and directive to highly informal and participatory. Avatars were able to view a live altar-building demonstration and then could build their own traditional Day of the Dead altars. SLVM featured an authentic Meso-American ballgame arena where games were organized at specified hours. Special guest Nancy Green held storytelling workshops and poetry readings. There were other live readings by Shannon Hardwick, Amalios Madueno, and Maria Miranda Maloney; poetry readings and open mic series; and presentations by the Rincon Bohemio National Literary Group, where participants were also able to share their own traditions, dances, poetry, and stories. A "Caleveras on Wheels" workshop featuring a visual literacy teaching method was specially designed with students in mind, as was a marionette

⁷The Smithsonian Latino Virtual Watershed Project, Interim Report for the Smithsonian 2.0 Fund, December 17, 2010, unpublished document.

⁸ Overall highlights from the 2010 Festival can now be viewed by the machinema video available at <http://SLVMinteractive.org/VIDEO/DODHIGHLIGHTS.mov>.

⁹ SL audiences also had the opportunity to sign up and play the Meso-American ballgame at scheduled times, but no one signed up, and the events were not held. Therefore they are not included in the total number of events.

performance and workshop by the artist Cesar Ivan. Musical performances by and an oral-history interview with the Latino icon Lila Downs and a performance by Stacey Fox were also featured. Last but not least, SLVM Director Melissa Carrillo commenced a customary Day of the Dead Procession that began with a prayer reading by a visiting Native Alaskan priest. Throughout the Festival, participants were encouraged to socialize and explore on their own the interactive exercises and information available on bilingual notecards and through other media; view films and other recordings; team up and play the Meso-American ballgame; and pick up free resources, which included a Day of the Dead outfit, t-shirt, and cap. Content from the Day of the Dead Festival such as lesson plans and scholarly information was accessible via the Festival's main website. The SLVM team provided the platform and technical support for implementation of the Day of the Dead Festival. The content that SLVM Creative Director Melissa Carrillo and her staff and partners generated was augmented by user-generated content.

SLVM marketed the Day of the Dead Festival by distributing a press release across SLVM networks, web and social media platforms, and news outlets. Marketing materials consisted of:

- A press release on Intsite.info, a website on resources and activities for the Spanish and Portuguese speaking community.¹⁰
- A press release at the online Newsdesk of the Smithsonian Institution.¹¹
- A post on the Washington, DC Examiner at examiner.com.¹²

To attract audiences, SLVM also created a Facebook page, SLVM Dia de los Muertos Festival, on which it posted event teasers, and provided a link to the SLC's website on the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Day of the Dead Festival page, from which visitors could download SL software and post blogs on the SLVM BlogSpot and the SL Blog. It also uploaded videos on YouTube and UStream.

The Day of the Dead Festival had several target audiences¹³:

- Regular SL users and new visitors who were attracted to SL by their interest in the Festival or SLVM.

¹⁰ <http://intsite.wordpress.com/2010/10/28/dia-de-los-muertos-festival-a-second-life-experience-october-29-to-november-2-2010/>.

¹¹ <http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/smithsonian-latino-virtual-museum-launches-second-annual-d-de-los-muertos-festival-second-l>.

¹² <http://www.examiner.com/smithsonian-museum-in-washington-dc/day-of-the-dead-a-multi>.

¹³ For a complete list of content providers see Appendix A. Also <http://lvminteractive.org/VIDEO/DODHIGHLIGHTS.mov> provides a visual summary of festival events and participants.

- Latino youth reached through partnerships with schools that serve underserved rural and urban Latino communities. Because SL does not allow users below 16 years of age without chaperones, SLVM arranged special times when only these younger visitors could access the Festival's site. (This SL restriction is one reason SLVM is now making its content available through virtual worlds other than SL, such as the Education Grid established by the Immersive Education Initiative.)
- Latino adults, many of them associated with Latino communities and organizations that provided content for the Festival.

The audiences participating at the Day of the Dead Festival in SLVM had an opportunity to explore Latino cultural heritage and/or Latino identities through the museum platform in ways that encouraged immersive learning and participation. Objectives of the Festival included:

- Building community.
- Increasing participants' understanding of Latino cultural heritage.
- Improving communication skills, especially narrative styles.
- Expanding cultural literacy.
- Understanding comparative characteristics of societies in the Americas.

Through this evaluation, SLVM staff hoped to:

- Find out what audiences thought worked well and what changes would have enhanced the experiences that staff hoped participants would have at the Festival, such as community building, social interaction, and learning about Latino culture.
- Test the effectiveness of this SLVM venue and the Festival in representing Latino cultural heritage.
- Test the implementation of a distance-learning program model and a Latino youth-outreach model with students at Holy Redeemer Catholic School (25 students) and the SEED School of Maryland (12 students). The distance-learning programming for these schools included an altar-building demonstration and activity, a visual-literacy workshop, and a marionette workshop.
- Test implementation of a Latino adult-outreach model that involved programming such as an art and literary series with the Rincon Bohemio National Literacy Group and an open mic; recordings of an oral history interview and a concert with Latino icon Lila

Downs; a Meso-American ballgame; a traditional Day of the Dead procession; live performances; and a party.

Purpose of the Study

SLC asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a study of SLVM's second Day of the Dead Festival and of the SLVM space in SL in which the Festival took place. The five-day event, which ran from October 29 to November 2, celebrated this well-known Latino tradition, which is enjoyed worldwide. The Festival took place in the virtual Museum's "Smithsonian Latino Music" island, with the Placita (the central plaza) serving as the focal point. Activities took place there and in adjacent spaces— including at a community altar and a cemetery that were produced specifically for the Festival.

At the time, the Festival as a whole was accessible only on the SL platform; some elements were available on the Festival's main website, social media platforms (such as Facebook, the SLVM blog, YouTube, UStream, and Flickr), four physical venues to which activities were streamed from SLVM, and two physical venues from which activities were streamed into SLVM. The study team collected information through interviews with and observation of visitors during the entire period of the Festival.

The study looked at:

- **Were the Latino youth- and adult-outreach models and distance-learning model successful?** What did the audiences and stakeholders at which the tests were aimed say about their experiences with the SLVM's Day of the Dead Festival and the space in SL in which it took place?
- **Overall satisfaction with the Festival.** How successful was SLVM in achieving its visitor objectives? What did visitors like and not like? What needs improving?
- **What experiences did visitors have at the Day of the Dead Festival?** Specifically, was the Festival successful in building communities and providing social experiences? How effective was the Festival in kicking off the literary and artist series? Did it succeed in establishing a platform that the community continued to use to create its own live programming, building on the live SLVM events? How did live events like the Procession support Festival goals?
- **How did participants use the learning objects and contexts they found (access, use, and interpret interactive learning objects), and what was the impact?** Did learning

take place? Did visitors access the learning objects, share their personal stories, build their own altars, and take objects, souvenirs, and avatar freebies?

- **What did visitors think about the navigation of SLVM?** Was everything clear?
- **Were they comfortable with the environment?** Was there anything they would add or change?
- **How effective were the marketing and promotion?** Was there excitement about the event as measured through engagement and participation in blogs, social media, etc.? Was the Festival well attended?

The issues reported in this study were raised by multiple audience members. Some are the result of the limited resources available for SLVM's production and may be easily solved as additional resources become available. Others can be attributed to visitors' and new avatars' lack of expertise and familiarity with the SL environment, to technical difficulties related to the operating systems required by SL, and to other problems that SLVM staff have limited ability to fix, such as limited access to SL from SI computers due to firewall issues. Within that context of a spectrum of causes, the study team decided to report all challenges raised by audiences, so that the SLVM team has a sense of what mattered to them. It is also important to note that the SLVM staff have already addressed some of the issues. For example, as a result of preliminary feedback from OP&A, SLVM has built in teacher and student training workshops prior to formal events.

Methodology

The study team engaged in the following data collection activities:

Observation: The OP&A study team conducted observations of the SLVM space in which the Day of the Dead Festival took place for the entire duration of the Festival (October 29 to November 2). Observers took notes on a number of different aspects of the site, including visitors' engagement with the site and Festival programs, implementation of offerings, organization of events, and technical difficulties. (See Appendix B, Instruments 1 and 2; Observation Form-Day has notes on the use of the SLVM site, and the Event Form presents notes on the individual offerings.) Two particular elements that the team observed were:

- **The public chat on SLVM**, from which the team collected conversations avatar visitors had while in SLVM and during and after Festival events as a way to assess their views of their experiences at the Festival and with the space in which the Festival took place.
- **Visitor "creations"** (e.g., altars), whose content was counted.

Interviews: To get a sense of how audiences were responding to the Day of the Dead Festival, the OP&A study team interviewed:

- **General visitors (avatars in SL):** The study team had 27 informal discussions with unique visitors/avatars during the period of the Festival, as well as with visitors to SLVM after or in-between the events associated with the Festival. (See Appendix B, Instrument 3, Interview Guide for Avatars.)
- **Content providers:** Seven in-depth interviews were carried out with content providers for the Day of the Dead Festival—SLVM contractors, community representatives, and artists and teachers who facilitated students’ experiences with the Festival—to assess the Festival’s success in community building. (See Appendix B, Instrument 4, Interview Guide for Content Providers.)

OP&A study team’s personal impressions: As team members explored the SLVM space, they noted their thoughts on any aspect (e.g., overall goals, the site’s organization, navigation, access, and functioning of objects).

Survey: Visitors had an opportunity to complete a three-question survey about their: (1) frequency of visits to SLVM; (2) overall satisfaction with SLVM during the Festival; and (3) likelihood of returning to SLVM. The survey was administered through four SLVM survey kiosks embedded within the SLVM space. (See Appendix C, Survey Form.)¹⁴

Analysis of the marketing strategy and “buzz” associated with the Festival. The study team reviewed the **social media sites**, reviewing the posts, reviews, and comments.

Essays from school children: Teachers from the Holy Redeemer Catholic School and SEED School of Maryland asked their students to write a short essay about their experiences with SLVM during the Festival. The teachers from Holy Redeemer provided the study team with the essays of 16 students; none were received from students at the SEED School. In addition, one team member conducted a live group discussion after the session that SEED school students had on SLVM on November 2.

¹⁴Visitors to SLVM completed only four surveys.

Findings

Appeal of the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum During the Day of the Dead Festival

Interviewees, including students, had a very positive view of the Day of the Dead Festival and the SLVM site within which it took place, regardless of which group they fell into and why they visited the site and Festival. Most rated their experience “superior” and described it as “amazing.” Their “favorite” aspect of the visit was either an experience they had while exploring SLVM, a SLVM feature, activity or offering, or a specific facilitated event offered during the Festival. Some praised SLVM’s “comfortable atmosphere.” A content provider, summarizing his overall view, said SLVM is “well-built, user-friendly, creative, and educational.”

Analysis of the data suggests several principal patterns of audiences and uses of SLVM during the Day of the Dead Festival. Uses that appealed to specific audiences are discussed next, followed by the positive experiences visitors in general had during the Festival. The two subsequent sections present audiences’ opinions of the Festival and of SLVM’s features during the Festival. Recommendations made by visitors are incorporated into each section.

Content Providers

Those people who provided some content during the Festival, such as reading poetry, telling stories, playing musical instruments, and leading workshops, were one of the main audiences and users of the Festival and of SLVM during the Festival. Generally these audiences found out about and participated in the Festival through the invitation of SLVM Creative Director Melissa Carrillo or a contractor, Maria Maloney, herself a content provider. This audience frequently used the SLVM space to spend time with other content providers. Other uses were practicing reading, playing instruments, playing the ballgame, hanging out with others, exploring the site, talking, and dancing.

Teachers

Several middle- and high-school teachers and college professors attended the Festival. They used the site mainly to teach a variety of subjects such as arts and culture, social sciences, and technology. Most described the site as a “useful tool” for teaching.

One K-8 art and technology teacher in Phoenix, AZ who has been using SL in her teaching said she brings her students, 95% of whom are Hispanics, into SLVM to learn about Latino culture

and to address a “current” topic such as the Day of the Dead. She described SLVM as an “enriching” environment:

[Interviewer:] *What did it [SLVM during the Day of the Dead Festival] add to your class?*

[Teacher:] *Engagement, inspiration, visual examples, creativity.*

Teachers also used the site for teaching Spanish and English. A Spanish teacher whom the study team observed with two students on the site described the content as “fantastic” and mentioned that allowing the use of “voice”¹⁵ is useful.

Other comments on what appealed to teachers about the site during the Festival were:

Exposure: *“This is an opportunity for kids from around the country to have experiences that they’re just not going to get any other way ... [often the focus is on] urban kids, but ... many of the kids in rural communities are isolated from a lot of things that are going on in the world in general, things that we would expect a citizen of the 21st century to know something about.”*

Customization: *“I love that [SLVM] is a 24-hour learning environment ... that is rich and varied and meets multiple learning styles. If you’re an auditory learner, you can go in and watch or listen to a video. If you’re a tactile-kinesthetic learner, you can go in and move around the environment and interact with learning objects.”*

Engagement: *“[The students] are so engaged. The intensity in their faces when they have to figure out how they can manipulate the environment and build something – they are very engaged in figuring that out.” ♦ “[The presenter] really engaged them, even though it was her avatar. I think they had a real sense that they were connecting to her. ... [In the virtual environment] there is a visceral reaction – you really get engaged in it just like you would be talking with the person sitting in the room with you.” ♦ “There were people right online talking to them or explaining what something meant. You could hear the excitement in their [students’] voices that there was a real person paying attention.”*

Motivation: *“[Talking to an educator in SLVM] makes the kids feel that what’s going on is more important, and that’s a motivator in itself – to learn something that they didn’t even know they were interested in. I think that the personal connection that this can provide is just a real thing that we should tap into.” ♦ “Anything that would open their eyes to the things that are there that maybe they can or can’t see in real life—I think it*

¹⁵ Visitors can use their computer microphones and speakers or headsets to talk to each other directly in SLVM, a feature that is not allowed everywhere in SL.

would spark them to go looking for a museum in their area or go looking for the education that could be around them in their communities that they are probably not paying attention to.”

Research: “[G]etting children used to using databases and used to [knowing] how to research and get in and investigate primary source material—that’s an important part of the curriculum. The SLVM is an excellent way for them to connect to a database. Even though they’ve entered through a virtual world, they’re in the actual archival information that the Smithsonian makes available to the public.”

The future: “Students are going to learn in a virtual environment when they are in college. So I feel that part of their curriculum has to include something that involves a virtual world.”

Students

Several avatars who identified themselves as students said they were visiting SLVM to complete an assignment. The types of projects and respective requirements varied. For example, one student at Ohio State University who was in SL said her professor pointed her to the site because she “wants/needs extra credit. [Other students from her class visit SLVM] if they missed a quiz.” The student was writing a 300-500 word essay on her experience with SLVM—what she did on the site, what she learned, and what she appreciated most.

Students generally liked the site because of its novelty (they don’t get much opportunity to interact in an environment like SL), the information they found in the space in particular, and the availability of multiple entry points related to their different preferences. (Students’ learning experiences are discussed further in the avatars’ experiences section below.)

Latinos

Some interviewees who identified themselves as Latinos said they came to the site either to experience their culture through this medium and/or to learn more about the Day of the Dead Festival or Latino culture generally. They thought the site was true to Latino culture and avoided stereotypes. Even a Latino could learn something there. And the site had some lasting uses—“Because of last year’s presentation, I was able to incorporate some of the festivities with my family and other people,” one content provider said.

Second Life Aficionados

SL aficionados were a target audience of the Festival and SLVM. Some people heard about the Festival from the SL event list, others from friends of SL audiences. Besides attending events during the Festival, members of this audience used the site as a social platform and for relaxation, exploration, and learning. The live events were especially appealing to this audience.

Said one person, “It’s [SLVM in SL] always beautiful” and has a mix of media—films, music, places, things to read. “I find it just a very enriching and pleasant experience for me.” For others it had a more personal use, such as reporting, professional networking, tying friendships, and building communities.

Experiences

Analysis of the interviews revealed that audiences came away with several of the intended experiences of SLVM and of the Day of the Dead Festival. They reported having the following experiences, regardless of the reason for their visit, their broader experience with SL, the duration of their stay, or the event(s) they attended.

“Fun” and “Cool”

“This was fun!” said one experienced user of SL about the time he spent in SLVM. A Holy Redeemer student commented, “My teacher’s avatar can fly, and I think that’s pretty cool. Not all games or virtual worlds are perfect, but I think Second Life is really close to reality.”

Social Interactions

Connecting, interacting, and engaging with other audiences was an experience many visitors found satisfying. They complimented each other’s avatar outfits; shared tips and personal websites (for example, one visitor shared her Flickr site of photos from Oaxaca); talked about their experience in SL and real life; talked about their backgrounds and leanings; and connected personally and socially. Veterans of SL see fostering social experiences as critical to the success of an event in the virtual world. A general visitor noted, “I live in Austin, Texas, and I’m thrilled to be able to hear people reading in El Paso. Plus the atmosphere in the virtual world is so fun.” This sentiment held true for students. “I liked answering the questions online, because I thought it was cool how we talked to them [Nancy Green] from far away online” was the explanation one student gave for why he enjoyed his experience at the Day of the Dead Festival. One interviewee had such a satisfying experience in SLVM that she wanted share it with her community outside of SL: “And I would like to ask you if I can put some information about this event (the learning) and the procession on my blog, in Portuguese, with pics, etc.”

Learning

For many visitors, those with or without a Hispanic background, learning about Latino culture was a satisfying experience. People mentioned a variety of topics they found in SLVM or during the live events of the Day of the Dead Festival, including the altar-building traditions, ballgame tournament, processions, Latino music, and Lila Downs. Said one student, “I learned some about why we celebrate the Day of the Dead. I also learned what that day means to people.”

Another interviewee for whom the Meso-American ballgames were a first said, “[I learned] the names of the gods, the rules of the game, the sacrificial aspect.”

Some Latino visitors spoke of learning about their own cultures. One person who had not been raised observing the Day of the Day Festival described her reinforced learning experience:

[Visitor:] *And it's a great opportunity to learn a different culture, which is useful.*

[Interviewer:] *Are you a Latina/o?*

[Visitor:] *Yes, I'm Hispanic. I live in San Antonio.*

[Interviewer:] *Oh. What do you think about how this place looks as decorated for the Day of the Dead?*

[Visitor:] *Well, it looks good to me. The cemetery seems fairly realistic, but I really didn't grow up observing this tradition.*

[Interviewer:] *You said it is a good place to learn about a different culture. Can you tell me anything specific that you learned or any message that it sends? What did you get out of it?*

[Visitor:] *I enjoyed reading about it—it reinforced some things I knew and exposed me to some I didn't. ... [It was] interesting because in this case there was an opportunity to learn about an unusual custom [altar building] and then try our hand at it.*

Most visitors expressed an interest in learning more about the Latino culture or expressed a wish to explore the site further. A veteran SL user who was interviewed early in her SLVM experience commented, “I would like to find out more about the cultural significance the event [Day of the Dead] has. Is there a place on here that I can read about that?”

Enabling students to learn about Latino culture through the site was a goal of SLVM staff. Following is what some teachers and students said about how the latter learned in SLVM:

- **In the words of teachers...** “It was a very meaningful experience for our students,” since it combined both *novelty* (they don’t get much opportunity to interact in an environment like SL) and *learning* (getting information they could take back to their classes). It also encouraged students to *expand* their learning. For example, kids who had noticed the names of people in the cemetery then asked if they could check out those biographies.
 - **Novelty:** “*The students like learning about the culture in a different way than in a simple classroom or lecture format. It was very exciting for them to be able to go and actually interact with other individuals and then interact with the learning objects, and to be able to manipulate their own environment. ... Any time that we can take our students out of that typical, lecture-teacher-student environment and give them something that’s more 21st century and engaging, I think it’s productive.*”

- **Learning:** *“The scavenger hunt ... addressed a multitude of content areas in a short expanse of time, and they [the students] got very excited and very engaged in finding the learning objects and learning more about each area.”*
- **Expansion:** *“Once the session was over, the students have often come back to the library wanting to revisit things [in SLVM].” ♦ “Schools don’t do a very good job of connecting what kids are learning to what’s really happening in the world. So that Olmec exhibit [a SLVM offering in SL situated outside the space in which the Day of the Dead Festival events took place] is just so wonderful because the kids actually can look at the sculptures, they can walk around that space and, when they click on something that’s of interest to them, then they’re into the database and maybe that’s a hook. They think, ‘Maybe I can also go look at more of the research, more of the information.’ It’s just a hook for them.”*
- **In the words of students...** Students seemed to agree that the learning experience in the SLVM was *fun* and *engaging*.
 - **Fun:** *“Yes, I had a good time in the virtual homage to the Day of the Dead. It was pleasurable to hear about the traditions and navigate online at the same time. I believe that anything online could effortlessly get a kid’s attention. We could be doing math problems online, and it would still be better than sitting at a desk and doing the same problems.”*
 - **Engaging:** *“I did enjoy the Second Life Latino Museum. I feel that it gave a lot of information about Latino culture. I also feel that the person explaining it was very good at explaining it to us. I liked navigating the space, but I didn’t get to write a story. I loved building an altar; it was so fun, and I hope I will be able to do this again soon.” ♦ “I enjoyed building the altar. It was very fun because it was 3D. I learned how they would decorate the altar with candles, water, pictures and much more.”*

Aesthetics

“I loved the art of the Dia de los Muertos,” said one interviewee. Others cited aesthetic experiences related to the design of the site, especially the marigold path, the procession, and the cemetery. “I enjoyed visiting the museum very much. The exquisite and inspiring paintings were very eye-catching,” a college student who was completing the project commented.

Freedom

A few visitors described in detail their excitement over the opportunity afforded by SLVM and the Day of the Dead Festival to be who they are and to do what they most like in a personal way. A veteran SL user said that the environment encouraged him to engage in a tradition he was never inspired to do in real life:

[Interviewer:] *But this [the altar he built] is different. This looks very personal.*

[Visitor:] *Oh. Well, it is. But, no, I've never done it in real life. ... which is maybe why I enjoyed so much here. ... I would feel strange doing it [in] real life, but here it was creative. ... These are mostly my mother's family.*

[Interviewer:] *It felt more natural do it here? Creative ... possible?*

[Visitor:] *It felt more comfortable—you know, in real life those of us who are caught between the two worlds often feel embarrassed at not knowing as much as we and others feel we should about our culture. Here I can be an expert to those who don't know anything and learn in a supportive way from those who do. ... We're nicer here than in real life. ... more tolerant ... more encouraging.*

Users of SL also used their avatars to express their image of self or identity through outfits. The Day of the Dead Festival offered its audiences the opportunity to try a new costume, a new identity. One experienced audience member described her experience:

[Visitor:] *Is this outfit too weird for Day of the Dead? lol ... I can try something else.*

[Interviewee:] *I love it :-)*

[Visitor:] *Ohhh. Great.*

[Interviewee:] *You're playing Nemo?*

[Visitor:] *I 'spose. Everyone says that, lol. It's actually [a] Japanese kimono belt ... with [a] clownfish mermaid tail. ... I have [a] Koi outfit, too.*

Engagement/Interactivity

Many interviewees spoke about the interactivity as one of the remarkable experiences. For example, an experienced SL user who was reticent about going to traditional museums described her visit to SLVM during the Day of the Dead Festival:

[Interviewee:] *Does this feel like a museum to you?*

[Visitor:] *No.*

[Interviewee:] *Should it look like a museum?*

[Visitor:] *Not necessarily. ... There are some here that are like museums, but I like this feel. ... and the interactive exhibits like these altars are very engaging.*

[Interviewee:] *When you say "like museums," what do you mean?*

[Visitor:] *Well, actually, I was thinking of some of the real-life art galleries that have been recreated in SL. ... they are like real-life galleries except you can click on the art and get history, which is nicer.*

[Interviewee:] *More information. But you like this better because of the interactive feature ...*

[Visitor:] *Of course. The art isn't as beautiful, but you get a good reproduction.*

Connecting with Culture

A majority of visitors had Latino backgrounds, and many enjoyed the opportunity offered by SLVM and the Day of the Dead Festival to connect with Latino culture. One experienced SL user of Hispanic heritage said, “I loved putting together the altar. Never had done that before, so it felt like reconnecting with the culture.” A woman said she visited SLVM specifically because “[I] love the culture. I collect Mexican folk art and textiles.”

Connecting with Latino culture was also an experience that visitors of non-Latino descent looked for. A non-Latino visitor who grew up in Mexico, for example, expressed a wish to come back and explore the space specifically to connect with Latino culture.

Relaxation

A few visitors talked about relaxing and decompressing. A person who had come to SLVM to learn Spanish said simply, “Um, well, it’s weird for me to say because this is the 1st time I have ever had a class like this, but it was actually relaxing. ... it relaxed me in real life to be calm in SL.”

Responses to the Day of the Dead Festival

Audiences praised the five-day Festival for its high-quality content, number and diversity of offerings, and implementation. The quality of the presenters, large numbers of ways to participate, potential for rich and diverse experiences such as those discussed above, and, mostly, the opportunity for rich Latino cultural experiences were all mentioned by visitors. Below are examples of visitors’ opinions of the Festival’s implementation, organization, wayfinding, access, attendance, and marketing, followed by what they said about the different events.

Implementation

Audiences generally praised the implementation of the Day of the Dead Festival. However, a few interviewees commented on some issues related to the events. For example, one of the storytelling workshops started late because sound/voice problems took time to solve. The SEED School of Maryland got to SLVM significantly later than scheduled because of difficulties connecting to the site. Another set of problems related to the above ones occurred because some presenters were relatively inexperienced with SL. One who had never used the program before did not make it to his event. When these kinds of problems occurred, SLVM staff and other content providers stepped in immediately to solve them in a prompt manner either by replacing the presenter or giving the technical assistance necessary for content providers to participate.

Visitors offered some suggestions for improving implementation:

- **Train presenters in SL:** *“Fully train presenters of SL content” ♦ “Perhaps the guest speakers need to be shown prior to the event how to control their avatar, and perhaps their avatars can be worked on so that they do not look so like they just created their account and played around with their hair. Funny it may seem, but here in SL people take notice.”*
- **Prepare teachers ahead of time:** *“[For live events], if it was up to me, I would have had a meeting in-world with the teachers, and talk about the event—what do you think are some strategies to get as many of them [students] as possible to participate?” ♦ “My suggestion would be for the teacher to try the activity with the students live to get them accustomed to the whole process. Then when they go into the virtual environment they’d be used to that kind of structured discussion and feel comfortable contributing.”*
- **Better guidance on using avatars:** Have better, more visible directions on how avatars can use SL media at events. (OP&A)

Organization of the Events

Participants praised the Day of the Dead Festival and SLVM in SL space in which it took place for their conceptual organization and diversity of programming. “I thought it was well done and thought out,” said one veteran SL-er. Other visitor observations were: “Your events are very diverse ... poetry, storytelling, sports, parades ... music ... that’s very good!” ♦ “And interesting!” Another person found that “Everything is pretty easy to understand.” Yet another said that “the schedule of events was helpful. I didn’t know what to expect, but when I came here for the practice round, I was very surprised that it was so detailed, even [down to] the poster with all the readers’ names.”

An experienced and knowledgeable interviewee was very positive about the types of programs offered and the Festival overall. She also commented that the “organization of events ... it’s pretty spread out time-wise. Your team has very long days!” (see Exhibit 1, Day of the Dead Calendar of Events).

Some content providers and a small number of visitors who attended the 2010 Festival talked about how it compared with the 2009 one. Visitors seemed to agree that the 2009 Festival had more traditional offerings and that its main highlight was the live Lila Downs concert streamed into SLVM (the 2010 Festival offered two facilitated presentations of a recording of the concert). Interviewees also commented that in 2009 there was more freedom in building the altar. On the other hand, there seemed to be agreement that this year’s Festival provided a wider range of offerings, such as more videos, hands-on activities, and information, as well as the “nice addition” of the ballgame. The 2010 Festival’s literary theme was seen as an excellent addition. People also thought 2010 brought better organization, implementation, and design. With respect

to the latter, the map, Calendar of Events, and the overall design were singled out. Also cited as important changes were the offerings for high-school students and Latino youth.

General suggestions about the organization of the Festival included:

- “[Have] back-to-back events so people would not have to go in and around, clustered around noon.”
- More logistical information for content providers such as directions on how to use media buttons, when to show up for practice, and what locations to go to.

Exhibit 1. Day of the Dead Festival Calendar of Events

All Times: Second Life Time (Pacific Time)	Friday October 29	Saturday October 30	Sunday October 31	Monday November 1	Tuesday November 2
All Day	Community Altar, behind the Church, everyday				
All Day	Public Sandbox: Build Your Own Altar, everyday				
8:00 am				Calaveras on Wheels Workshop: Nancy Green	Calaveras on Wheels Workshop: Nancy Green
9:00 am				Ball Court of the Sun Open Play Sign Up	
10:00am	Learning Altar Demo	Learning Altar Demo	Learning Altar Demo pre-recorded	Learning Altar Demo	Learning Altar Demo
10:30am				Marionette Workshop: Cesar Ivan	Marionette Workshop: Cesar Ivan
12:00 noon	Story Telling Workshop Nancy Green		Ball Game Tournament Kick Off Game: LVM vs UND		
1:00pm		Story Telling Workshop Nancy Green		Ball Court of the Sun Open Play: Sign Up	
2:00pm					
6:00 pm		Live Readings by: Shannon Hardwick, Amalios Madueño, & Maria Miranda Maloney.	Sin Fronteras Cafe Presents: Live Poetry Reading & Open Mic: Nancy Green	Sin Fronteras Cafe Presents: Live Rincón Bohemio	Sin Fronteras Cafe Presents: Live Rincón Bohemio
7:00 pm	LVM Dia De Los Muertos Procecion -Placita			Exclusive LVM Interview: Lila Downs	Exclusive LVM Interview: Lila Downs
7:30 pm		Master Percussionist Stacey Fox Live Performance Crystal Skull		Hollywood Forever Presents- Lila Downs	Entree: Hollywood Forever Presents: Lila Downs
8:00 pm	Sin Fronteras Cafe Presents: Live Poetry Reading & Open Mic: Nancy Green				
8:30 pm		3D Crystal Skull Dance Party		Ball Court of the Sun Open Play: Sign Up	
10:00pm					
Film Festival	Beginning at 9:00pm	Beginning at 9:00pm	Beginning at 9:00pm	Beginning at 9:00pm	Beginning at 9:00pm
SCREEN 1	Cesar Ivan, Dia de Los Muertos paintings.		Cesar Ivan, Dia de Los Muertos paintings.		
SCREEN 2	The Meaning of the Altar by Griselda Flores		The Meaning of the Altar by Griselda Flores		
SCREEN 3	The Meaning of the Aztec Dance by Isela Laca.		The Meaning of the Aztec Dance by Isela Laca.		
SCREEN 4		Skeleton Frolic 1937	Skeleton Frolic 1937		
SCREEN 5		Dia de los Muertos in Oaxaca	Dia de los Muertos in Oaxaca		
SCREEN 6		Skeleton Dance	Skeleton Dance		
SCREEN 7			La Santa Cecilia in concert from 2009 Hollywood Forever De		
SCREEN 8					
SCREEN 9					

Teachers had a number of suggestions for improving school visits:

- **Security:** “It’s a difficult place to be with students. In fact, until a month ago you

weren't even supposed to have students in SL. So what I would do is I would share something ... through my avatar. [After] it led us to the database, I would let students log into the database, and they used it just to explore a little bit about the collections. ... [I] keep the kids off SL unless it's a specific event which was organized and we know it's locked down. Because my students are not really old enough to have their own accounts. ... There are other virtual worlds that are designed for middle-school students. So I do those in the classroom because everybody can have their own account."

- **Timing:** *"Thirty-minute [SLVM sessions] would be ideal. That would give them [the students] time to come in, get logged into the computers, be ready to roll and then be able to leave sensibly ... Maybe a way to do it would be that every Monday at 9 o'clock, the sim [virtual island] would be locked down, and we could do a scavenger hunt.*
- **Level:** *"If you make an adult environment that's a cultural environment—something that's intelligent—then it's better for the students. Because people tend to dumb things down for students, and students don't need that. They don't need it made 'children-friendly.' They need to interact with the real art, the real artist, the real music."*

Wayfinding

Audiences gave wayfinding in SLVM mixed reviews. An interactive map with instructions on how to locate Festival events was located in the Placita next to the Calendar of Events (see Exhibit 2. Map of Day of the Dead Festival's Events). Some interviewees praised the map, the Calendar of Events, and the design elements intended to facilitate getting around SLVM. For example, one SL veteran who found the wayfinding helpful said of the design features of the site:

I really like the marigolds path. One of my big problems with SL is dropping in near a venue, and not being able to know what I'm looking for or how to find my way around. The open layout, low and spaced-out structures, and the marked path really help.

On the other hand, an inexperienced SL user had a more troublesome wayfinding experience: "Since I'm not very familiar with SL, I had a very difficult time 'finding' the cafe. I'm guessing if I [had] used SL before, it would've been easier." When study team members were conducting observations, visitors often intercepted them with wayfinding questions. The study team noted a further problem—a visitor's avatar did not necessarily "land" next to the Festival's Calendar of Events or the map, and it was not immediately obvious how to get to the Placita where the calendar and map were located.

Exhibit 2. Map of Day of Dead Festival's Events



Among the suggestions made for improving wayfinding were the following:

- A map with properly working teleporting features to take you straight to an event.
- Additional design mechanisms for wayfinding in addition to the very helpful marigolds path.
- “Maybe an index system can be implemented so people who arrive can easily pick a destination within.”
- Flags that list the place, and not just the event title, time, and day. Also, links on the flags that would teleport the visitor to the event and guidance on how to find it. For example,

the freestanding poster on the Lila Downs interview gave the date, time, and event title but offered no link or mention of where it was taking place. (OP&A)

- More visible landmarks. Even when the map said where events were taking place, the landmarks could be hard to spot. For example, there was no visible landmark that said “Large Cabana” or “Small Cabana.” (OP&A)
- All directions in both English and Spanish. (OP&A)

Access

Some content providers, visitors, and study team members noted that it was not easy to find SLVM in SL during the time of the study. Simple searches for “Smithsonian” or “Latino Virtual Museum” or “Smithsonian Latino Museum” did not generate results. A person needed to know to type “Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum” to access the site. Said one visitor, “‘Smithsonian Museum,’ it’s not going to give you anything. So you either have to type ‘Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum’ or ‘...Main,’ but sometimes that doesn’t even work. That’s big.” Further, some interviewees noted that the link provided on the SLVM site got them only to SL’s welcome center and did not place them at SLVM in SL. Interviewees said that this was a “major” issue. According to one person, “Many people may not know they have to do that, and they may get discouraged.” Another person commented that even when they found a link to the space, it did not work, for example, “The URL landed me underwater.”

Suggestions to improve access included:

- Provide a well-functioning location-based link for the Day of the Dead Festival and the SLVM in SL on SLVM’s web page and the official Day of the Dead Festival webpage, as well as on all its other media outlets (e.g., Facebook and the SLVM blog).

When you go into SL, people download their software, they have their avatars, they’re ready to go—they go to the welcome center, and then they have to find the SLVM. So my suggestion is that whoever is programming, they have to somehow get a link going for ‘Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum’ so that people can find it.

Attendance at Events

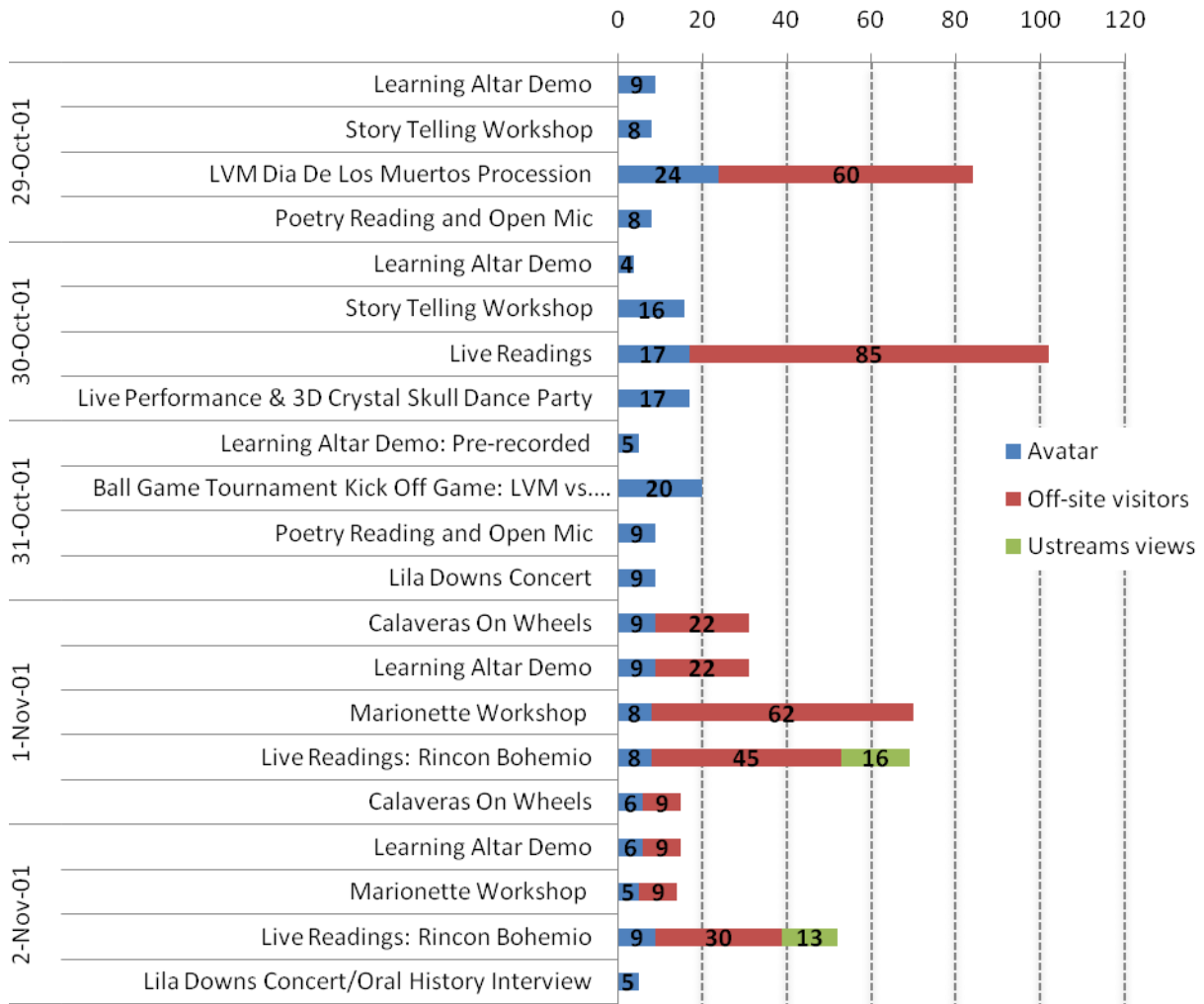
As noted, the Festival connected with constituents, offsite visitors, past visitors, and others (see Exhibit 3). It reached Latino communities in Albuquerque, NM and El Paso, TX and students at two schools in Maryland. It reached college students and professors in a variety of states such as Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Maryland and in countries such as Colombia, Sweden, Spain, Mexico, and Japan.

The extent to which these different groups attended different events varied (each event, including the level of attendance, is discussed separately below, along with interviewee suggestions for how to facilitate future school visits). In the case of avatars, some events attracted a high level of participation, others less so. Roughly 24 avatars attended the Procession, whereas less than 10 were at other events. Not all Festival events were open to all SL audiences. For example, the first three events on November 2 were targeted to students in middle school. Because that age was lower than SL allows, SLVM was closed to other visitors at that time.

Specific Festival events targeted both SL and offsite audiences in physical venues. Other events such as the procession were offered in SLVM and also projected on large screens for offsite audiences. Still other events such as the Rincon Bohemio readings and the Marionette workshop took place offsite and were streamed live into SLVM. Events for both offsite and onsite audiences were also streamed online.

The largest audience was the 85 visitors attending the Live Readings event that was streamed to visitors in El Paso, Texas, Los Angeles, New York, and New Mexico. After that came the Procession, which was projected to an audience of over 60 people in the Percolator Theatre and El Paso Library, as well as Albuquerque, NM. The Rincon Bohemio literary group was attended by as many as 40 offsite participants in the Percolator Theater.

Exhibit 3. Attendance at the Day of the Dead Festival’s Live Events
(number of avatars, offsite visitors, and UStream views)



Source: Avatar numbers— number of avatars counted by OP&A observers during the live events; the avatars included SLVM staff, contractors, and other avatars and excluded OP&A observers. Offsite visitors—visitors who viewed the live events from offsite locations; numbers were provided by SLVM staff. UStream views—number of times a live event provided through UStream was accessed; numbers recorded at the end of the live events and were provided by SLVM staff.

Marketing

To attract visitors to the Day of the Dead Festival, SLVM aimed to launch an advertising campaign via its network, the web, social media, and news media. This section reports the SLVM’s web presence and discusses the use of social media for that purpose. It also provides visitors’ comments about the campaign’s success.

SLVM's web presence comprised:

- The main SLVM site, hosted under the SLC domain that contains the SLVM Day of the Dead Festival website¹⁶ (it has resources to use in the classroom, such as lessons plans and activities) and the website designed for kids in 2009 with Disney funds.¹⁷ Both websites displayed information on the Day of the Dead Festival available in SL.
- The SLVMinteractive.org site, which serves as a hub for other media applications besides SL.¹⁸
- Web 2.0 accounts such as a blog published with the Blogger platform and YouTube, Facebook, UStream, and Flickr.

The use and management of the web information on the Day of the Dead Festival were beyond the scope of this study. However, the OP&A study team was asked to look at the marketing strategy on the social networking platforms. SLVM's Facebook "Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Dia de los Muertos Festival" seems to have attracted the most community participation, with over 150 "Likes"¹⁹ just for this year's Festival. The blog is a promising way to engage enthusiastic users, who can participate easily without having to log into SL. There were seven SLVM posts in 2010, only a few of which directly advertised the Day of the Dead Festival, while the rest consisted of poetry posted by Festival contributors. YouTube during the data collection period featured three videos viewed over 300 times, and the Flickr photos were viewed almost 400 times since the account was created. Additional videos were featured on the SLVMinteractive.org site.²⁰

Among the comments of content providers on SLVM's use of social media as a marketing strategy to draw audiences to the Festival, one theme was that too little time and resources had been allocated to implementing the strategy. Another was that more coordination among SLVM staff and contractors was needed. Concluded one person, "This social networking marketing thing cannot be done easily. It requires a lot of coordination and a lot of time."

The OP&A study team talked with members of a target SL audience—experienced users—about the marketing and publicity for Day of the Dead Festival directed at them. Those who saw the marketing materials were impressed with their quality. "I am surprised by the high level of professionalism in the marketing materials," said a veteran of SL. She continued, "I've never seen anything handled quite that well in SL, with your press release and all your custom artwork

¹⁶ <http://latino.si.edu/education/SLVMDayoftheDeadFestival.htm>.

¹⁷ <http://latino.si.edu/DayoftheDead/>

¹⁸ <http://SLVMinteractive.org/>

¹⁹ The OP&A study team found 165 "likes" several days after the Festival, a number that is likely to increase.

²⁰ Twitter and Delicious did not seem active during the Day of the Dead Festival. The OP&A study team did not find any LinkedIn postings. The UStream account is now off air but was used during the Festival.

posters.” However, some skilled SL visitors to SLVM commented on the “sparse” participation by avatars at most events. One interviewee thought that “having 20 avatars or more would be very good [attendance].” An interviewee who especially liked the content of the Festival remarked, “I was disappointed there weren’t more [visitors.]”

Interviewees offered some suggestions for reaching the SL audience: *“Publicize it [the Festival] more so there are more participants ... it could have been listed in poetry, live music maybe, art, fashion.”* ♦ *“There are specialized groups for all those kinds of activates in SL ... your marketing outreach could be hitting them with ads ... bringing more people into the overall show.”* ♦ *“My recommendation would be to get the word out more, such as the [top of] the event calendar if your event isn't already there, or if at all possible, [at] the SL login tag that everyone sees.”*

Content providers also commented on the limited presence of avatars. One said, for example, that the “[Day of the Dead] should have been promoted better. [...]There wasn’t quite as much outreach as there could have been.” An interviewee with marketing experience in SL acknowledged, however, that getting the word out in SL is not easy.

This person suggested that outreach to key groups was critical to success in attracting participants to events:

[Visitor]: *The biggest issue is getting the word out. And that is everyone's BIG ISSUE ... everyone who does large-scale events, anyway.*

[Interviewer]: *What about this event do you think is appealing to other SL audiences?*

[Visitor]: *Oh my! The big draw is of course the MUSIC. Live music is huge in SL. ... Remember, SL is like real life. ... only ALL THE PEOPLE on the planet are here in a place that is roughly the equivalent of a small city. You usually have 50,000-60,000 people here at any one time. Just like real life, you have many diverse groups with many interests. Music is one thing that draws EVERYBODY in.*

Interestingly and propitiously, all the visitors who thought that attendance was too low relative to the quality and diversity of the events enthusiastically offered to spread the word and share information about the Festival within their own groups. Some offered a long list of groups, others just their top choices, which included Blue Angel Poets and Cafe Wellstone. Blogs such as New World Notes or iNews were also mentioned, along with a number of music groups such as Second Life Music, Musicians Circle, Live Musicians and Singers, Life Music Enthusiasts, Music not Politics, Independent Musicians Group, SL Musicians, and Music Hall of Fame.

Again there were suggestions for strengthening marketing:

- **Offer more live events:** This suggestion was the most often mentioned, particularly by experienced SL visitors. Complementing this suggestion was having a good marketing

plan to make people aware of the events.

As to the type of live events, one person said that “Poetry is good. Music is actually really good—one of the high points of SL is all the live music. I don’t know of any specific Latino musicians who do gigs in SL, but I would be shocked if there weren’t many.” Another person wanted to see “a band of musicians parading down the street.” An interesting comment was the tough situation of museums in SL—“It’s hard with a museum” —but the person went on to say that “live musical acts do bring people in if they know about them. I would say a really good built [design of sim], a full slate of events, and a Flickr and Facebook site would go a long way.”

A very experienced SL-er who attended three Festival events and thought SLVM could attract a “much bigger crowd” suggested that “using live music groups to announce live music events can often draw a crowd” and “there is a large poetry following here as well ... and I'm sure that games do, too.” The person recommended catering more to this type of audience.

Other people thought still other events would be good draws: *“I would hope there would be things like creating an altar that could be done with some of these other topics. ... [a] session on great photographers or photography [that] would maybe include a session on how to compose photos, and in SL we could do that and have a contest ... traditions for weddings and quinceañeras or cooking ... Music. ... wedding customs vary worldwide, so I think maybe comparing them ... And for [an] interactive, putting together a Mexican wedding ... challenge people to find traditional stories and come share them. ... sitting around telling the stories like the one about the crying woman ... if you did a production of that play [the Christmas temptation of the shepherds], there are actors in Second Life who would participate.”* ♦ *“I’m interested [in coming back], but it depends on what there will be to do and see or hear. It does interest me that the Smithsonian is involved. Most people want to learn something—we do workshops, and also we all want the opportunity to talk, read poetry, or perform in some way, show off. These kinds of contests are good fun.”*

- **Target SL audiences better:**

- One interviewee thought that SLVM staff needed to know the museum’s audiences better and to engage more with the *“large Latino community already here in SL ... reach out to people, get involved in things, get to know people who are interested, take time to participate in some of the big educational groups, and be there ready to speak up for the Latino community and contribute to the dialogue.”* ♦ *“Have members of your staff join other groups that would have similar interests and ask the owner/manager of those groups to post notices*

regarding special events (there are a variety of Museum and Education groups here, for example)."

- *"Most importantly ... GET THE WORD OUT about what you are doing. Have SOMs [Subscribe-O-Matic] placed around the event so that people can easily join. You will soon have a group of people who then will talk to others."*
- *"Using SL Search: a member of the group with permissions to post on SL Search can list up to 5X daily. You can certainly have more than one person listing. You would want to list under more than one category (Discussion, Education, Art and Culture)."*
- *"Use key people in your network you already have writing about this event. [Anonymous person] is also excellent at posting notices in many groups regarding special events. Make a note of [anonymous person's] name, and be sure to send [anonymous person] info for programs. ... You also have a gem of a friend in Nany Kayo [a content provider for the Day of the Dead]. Nany is widely respected (she is the force behind Virtual Native Lands) and can also provide so much good info on getting the word out."*
- *"Subscribe-O-Matic (SOM): many people cannot JOIN another group. SL has a limit of 25 groups that any one avatar can join (although I hear that will go up to 40 sometime soon). A SOM allows anyone to join without using a group space, and then when you are doing a special program/event, you can send out a notice via the SOM to everyone who has signed up. I strongly suggest that you look into this."*
- *"SL has its own television programs!! Yes! Treet TV and Rezzed TV are the two that come to mind. Paisley Beebe (has her own show on Treet TV) is a WONDERFUL contact, has an extremely popular program, and would be a wonderful contact for you."*
- **Do more outreach to other audiences:** *"The library was very interested in developing and bringing the Smithsonian's virtual exhibits to their site ... Other museums should also be able to access these exhibits ... Also, of course, people [are] already online, SL-ers. I think the SLVM really needs to capture those audiences already out there." ♦ "You have a lot of visitors at the Smithsonian—provide information there. Also have [information] at the museum, orientation maybe on a large screen."*
- **Engage in more collaboration:** *"I'd like to see more people being involved in Mexico, maybe in the National Museum, maybe the Templo Mayor."*

- **Have a mini-tour video:** *“Do a mini-tour [on the website and YouTube] —without having to create an avatar and all that—a video so that people wouldn’t have to go out and buy the latest computer. A user-friendly orientation that would say, ‘Come and join us,’ and show what it’s all about, and get the public interested and teachers excited. Do a whole demonstration.” ♦ “Show demonstrations. If there’s an event in SLVM, make sure the public can go and watch the event at the library or something, at least as spectators. And then they could go home and try it out.”*
- **More social opportunities:** *“I want to be able to discuss with people, too, not just be told, with museum staff maybe as moderators or leaders, but also with others in a group. It gives me a chance to meet people interested in the same things—history, science, art, sports, whatever.*
- **More use of social media:**
 - “The [SLVM] blog has to be continuously updated, it has to be linked to other museums, other SL sites, maybe education sites, to build a presence. That has to be done continuously. That’s the only way to reach the public.”
 - “My suggestion is to centralize all the social networking to one person.”
 - Include a social media utility-bar plug-in on the SLVM website to organize links to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr pages, and have clear visible links to social media outlets on the SLVM page. [OP&A]
 - With regard to the layout of the blog, although it is clean and attractive, consistency with SLVM’s main site would be ideal for brand consistency. There is also some old advertising from 2007 still prominently displayed that would likely best be removed. The blog lacks hierarchical organization and does not have any real navigation besides chronological browsing and an archival listing. Perhaps a post category navigation tree at the top right would be the easiest method of improving usability. Finally, the blog could again implement a social media utility-bar plug-in, as recommended for the main site. [OP&A]
 - With respect to the YouTube page, there are many additional videos featured on the SLVMinteractive.org site that could be uploaded to YouTube to increase visibility. [OP&A]
 - The fan page for the 2009 Day of the Dead Festival is still active and draws the majority of Google searches away from the current page. Although the fan page does have a substantial number of “likes,” there have only been two wall posts from users besides SLVM itself. Greater participation could be aided by uploading already existing videos from the SLVMinteractive.org site. Perhaps creating a new non-year-specific fan page for the Day of the Dead Festival would

be the best strategy for providing navigational clarity from web searches and within Facebook; this would also allow longtime followers would not have to be notified annually of a new page. [OP&A].

The Festival's Events

Learning Altar Demonstration

Altar-building demonstrations lasting about seven minutes were offered each day of the Festival (Exhibit 4). The program involved a description by Emily Key (an educator) and Olga Herrera²¹ (a research scholar/curator) of the Latino Day of the Dead tradition, including the symbolism, which Latinos around the world practice. The demonstrations were presented live four times; a recording was played the fifth time. Visitors could access a video of the demonstration in SLVM throughout the Festival. Three of the five demonstrations were available to all SLVM audiences; a relatively small group of visitors attended (Exhibit 3 above shows the attendance on each day).²² The November 1 program was presented to a class of 25 students from mixed grades at the Holy Redeemer Catholic School.

On November 2 SLVM was closed to the public during all morning activities, including the Altar-Building Demonstration, except to the middle-school students from the SEED School of Maryland.

Administration and implementation of the Learning Altar Demonstrations were generally good, with only minor delays and technical difficulties. The main problem was a crash of the computer and network at the SEED School of Maryland, which may have been related to scheduled server maintenance being performed at Linden Labs (the owner of SL).

Only a few interviewees commented on the Learning Altar Demonstrations, but they were all positive. They said the presenters provided eloquent explanations of the meaning and symbolism of the objects and that the program was “wonderful!,” “well presented,” and very informative. All offered their appreciation of the presenters—“I love the information on symbolism,” said one interviewee who went on to build her own altar. Audiences also enjoyed the interactive objects and accessing information in an interactive way. While the majority of students liked trying their hand at building an altar (this activity is discussed in the sandbox section), they said they also liked “the presentation on symbolism” and that they learned “a lot of fascinating information.”

²¹ Olga Herrera co-presented only the Altar Demonstration on October 29; Emily Key provided the rest of the demonstrations.

²² One OP&A observer could not teleport to the Placita in time to observe the facilitated event. When she arrived eight minutes after the pre-recording was played, five people were in the Placita, four of them SLVM staff or content providers.

Content providers also expressed this view.

Exhibit 4. Learning Altar Demonstration



One suggestion was to offer more fun/engaging ways of delivering the presentation—“Even though the speech about the rituals was a little tedious, it contained a lot of valuable information. My advice to you guys is to spice up the information.”

Storytelling Workshops

The Day of the Dead Festival featured a storytelling workshop on October 29 and 30, delivered by the artist Nancy Green, an educator/musician/poet; the events also featured an open mic session (see Exhibit 5). The moderators and content providers shared poems, and strongly encouraged the audience to share their own stories. Visitors did offer their stories and poems, but it proved hard to generate any discussion (Exhibit 3 above shows the attendance on each day). It might be that there were sound problems (sometimes the audio/microphones did not work properly). It may also be that the chat option is not conducive to discussion.

Exhibit 5. Storytelling Workshop



Participants thought the moderator did a wonderful job presenting the material and inviting others to participate. Interviewees commented on the experiences the program offered, including providing a sense of freedom to be creative and to share. Interestingly, a content provider who commented “I miss the human interaction, being able to see the voice and eyes directly” went on to say that “this medium allows us the freedom to explore other realities, to explore who we are and how we protect our essence and our spirit.” Other interviewees offered similar comments: “The avatar helps me to be free in ways I cannot in the world. It behaves the way I do in dreaming” and “This is preparing me for crossing over to the other side. It will be just like going into SLVM. Maybe that will ease my fears.”

To OP&A study team observers, the audiences seemed very engaged in the storytelling workshop for the most part. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to share personal stories from their lives and memories of childhood places and loved ones, and to hear from others—one person proclaimed “Amazing!” on hearing someone else’s story. People reflected on the meaning of expressing themselves through an avatar and on the liberty it creates. Presenters described the creative/organic process that takes place when creating and sharing stories in SL. For most, the storytelling workshop was a wonderful opportunity to connect with other visitors and with their cultures and specifically with the Day of the Dead Festival. One interviewee said of her experience, “I liked it, the story she shared. Reminds me of home ... of family ... of our culture.”

Ballgame Tournament

The Day of the Dead Festival featured a Meso-American ballgame tournament. The players consisted of SLVM staff, other content providers, and University of Notre Dame professors and students. SL audiences had an opportunity to sign up to play the game using SLVM's

Exhibit 6. Ballgame Tournament



infrastructure. Ten players engaged in the tournament, and 10 SL visitors watched it. NMNH curator Jane Wash read the rules of the game from a curatorial statement²³ provided for the event. The SLVM Creative Director was there throughout the game to answer questions and make sure players followed the rules. The game started on time.

²³ Script/Curatorial Statement: "The ball game played on a court with a rubber ball and two opposing teams was a defining characteristic of Mesoamerican cultures, although the game was found in islands of the Caribbean, as far south as the Amazon and as far north as the American Southwest. There were many types of ball courts, and many different games. In the great metropolis of Teotihuacan there are murals depicting a ball game played with sticks, while other cultures played something more like modern soccer. The ball was moved up and down the court by means of hips, shoulders and legs, but no hands. Different games had religious significance and involved human sacrifice, others were ideological and political and probably some were played just for fun where gambling was also involved. The game has been played in one form or another for nearly three thousand years, and can still be enjoyed in a variety of places in Mexico." ([Dr. Jane MacLaren Walsh, PhD](#))

There is inherent tension between the historical practice of the Meso-American ballgame and its replication within SL. Because of programming limitations, it wasn't possible, for example, to have the avatars move the ball using their shoulders and hips in an authentic way. Instead, they had to use their feet. On the other hand, the hoop was very close to the size of the ball as it was historically, and this made it very difficult to score. A few times someone needed information about the rules, for example, "How do you use your hands?" asked one player, while another commented that they "just need to make the hoops realllly big."

Based on the OP&A study team's observations of the ballgame, interviews with participants, and comments made on public chat forums, the audiences were very engaged in the game, had fun, learned about it, and discussed how it was played and how it differed from current games, among other things. One visitor who appreciated the historical information described her experience watching the game as "fun and informative [...] There was great historical info given—the names of the gods, the rules of the game, the sacrificial aspect." Another person compared the game to modern-day sports, saying "I thought golf was difficult"; there were comparisons with other sports and settings such as soccer and the Super Bowl. For others, watching the game made them reminisce about fun times they had had in school, with one person saying, "[the Meso-American ballgame is] not all that different from early grade school soccer lol." Excitement was evident throughout the game. When a player scored, a participant exclaimed, "HoOOOOOOoooooOOOOoooooOOOOoooooOOOOoOOOOooooOOO ooOOOOoooooOOOOoooooOOOO..!!!! HAHAHAHAHAHA." In short, all the interviewees enjoyed the game and were pleased to see so many participants.

Toward the end of the game, with scoring a bit too hard in such an environment, the audiences seemed to lose interest, even though, in a departure from the traditional role, the referee did a great job keeping them engaged with comments on the play, jokes, etc. On the other hand, he spent little time discussing the background of the game and its rules and Meso-American culture, or responding to questions from players and the audience. Some interviewees raised questions about the information provided on the game, indicating disagreement over some aspects.

The following are suggestions made for improving this program:

- Provide everyone access at any time to the rules of the game or a FAQ that might help those playing and/or interested in the game.

The Procession

The Day of the Dead Festival Procession was a memorable experience for those who participated (see Exhibit 7). In addition to a crowd of 24 who attended the event in SLVM, 60 offsite visitors saw it in the Percolator Theater, audiences from a public library in Texas participated via LCD projector/avatar, and a live audience in Albuquerque saw a feed on a screen.

The event started with a traditional prayer recited by an Alaskan native, followed by remarks by Nancy McDonalds, the Director of Virtual Native Lands in SecondLife. Olga Herrera, a Smithsonian curator, talked about the Day of the Dead tradition. Then people witnessed and participated in a parade down a path marked by marigolds, with a percussion performance by artist Nancy Green.

Interviewees who participated in the procession all indicated that it was their favorite part of the Festival. When asked what they found appealing about the Festival, one SL veteran responded, “The parade! I also appreciated the prayers to give reverence to the event.” Another explained that the procession “is Day of the Dead at its core.” Visitors enjoyed the relatively high number of participants, the “spiritual experience,” and the “realism” and “symbolism.”

Exhibit 7. The Procession



Poetry Reading and Open Mic

The Sin Fronteras Café in SLVM’s La Placita hosted two one-hour live sessions of poetry readings and open mics led by Nancy Green; Maria Miranda Maloney, a writer and a poet herself, also contributed (see Exhibit 8). The first poetry reading started relatively late due to voice/sound technical issues. The programs began with professional artists reading their poetry, some accompanied by instruments such as an accordion. Then audience members were invited to share their own poems, and most did so enthusiastically. Some poems were in Spanish only. Besides sharing poems, the audiences talked about Latino culture and the role that death plays

within it. They also discussed values, norms, and other aspects of Latino culture, such as the role of family.

A relatively small number of people attended the events (see Exhibit 3), but they seemed to enjoy each other’s poems, stories, and company greatly, based on comments such as “very powerful!,” “beautiful!” and “beautiful poetry!” People applauded each other’s works and encouraged each other’s creativity and enthusiasm. An atmosphere of connection with culture and people that was almost family-like dominated the sessions. Some people commented on the pleasurable combination of poetry and background music, for example, “I really love how the background music projects ... it’s so whimsical ... bravo!”

Exhibit 8. Poetry Reading and Open Mic



Live Readings

Three people were scheduled to do live readings—Shannon Hardwick, Maria Miranda Maloney, and Amalios Madueno—but the latter did not make it to the event. Attendance was relatively good in-world, with 17 avatars participating, and a large community of external participants—85

people who were members and audiences of the Rincon Bohemio group—viewed the live event in El Paso, TX, New York, New Mexico, and Los Angeles.

The readings started relatively late because of technical issues, as one of the presenters had never used SL before. Shannon Hardwick started off reciting poems, and then Maria Miranda Maloney facilitated the contributions from the Rincon Bohemio group. Additional technical difficulties relating to the sound/voice impeded a completely smooth implementation of the program.

Despite the technical difficulties, the audiences seemed to enjoy this format for poetry reading. The event was well-facilitated, and the presenters were effective in inviting other people to participate. Most, including the SLVM Creative Director, offered readings. Visitors applauded each other's poems. In sum, the event seemed to succeed in engaging audiences in a social setting and in getting people to share their poems.

Readings by the Rincon Bohemio, National Literary Group

Rincon Bohemio, a National Literary Group, streamed live from the Percolator Café in El Paso, TX on November 1 and 2. A more or less equal number of visitors—roughly 10 avatars in SLVM and 40 offsite visitors in the café—were in attendance. Viewers could access a live stream from UStream, and a total of 16 and 13 views were registered respectively by the end of event. Many people (including the observers) were not able to see the live stream in-world and ended up watching the UStream video online. Directions on how to access the stream (the URL) had to be provided several times. Some people had problems with the sound. The OP&A study team also notes that the umbrellas made the screen hard to see without additional adjustment of the camera or avatar's position.

The programs, which started on time, consisted of introductions, traditional Native dances and readings. There was also a presentation on a Day of the Dead tradition: on November 1 Hispanics across the globe celebrate the return of the spirits of children by setting a table at home with food (sweets and things that children like) and objects/toys for children. On November 2 they celebrate the return of the spirits of adults, including with a visit to the cemetery and the construction of altars to honor the dead.

Audiences in SL greatly enjoyed the broadcast from the Percolator Café. They described what they saw with words such as “wow,” “fantastic,” “wonderful,” and “beautiful.” A sense of community, of sharing tradition and culture, was palpable.

Exhibit 9. Readings by the Rincon Bohemio Group



Following is the OP&A study team's suggestion for improving this program:

- Make the environment as user-friendly as possible for all avatars, regardless of their experience with SL. For example, adjust or remove the umbrellas from the Café Courtyard as they impeded the view of the screen.

Caleveras on Wheels Workshops

The Day of the Dead Festival featured two workshops, designed specifically for K-12 students, that focused on improving visual literacy skills (see Exhibit 10). Nancy Green, the facilitator, used the Caleveras on Wheels mural displayed on the back wall of SLVM's church as the focal point of the workshops. The first program involved 25 students in a computer class; three were avatars in SL, and the rest watched the presentation on a screen in the classroom. This workshop went relatively smoothly, except that the students arrived slightly late, and there were some sound-related problems.

The students were very engaged by Nancy Green’s presentation and facilitation, and they responded to her questions such as “Is there a difference between a soul and a spirit?” and “Is there life after death?” They asked their own questions and offered their own interpretations of the mural. They wrote stories about what they saw. At the end both teachers and students praised Green for a wonderful interactive learning experience. Said one student,

I learned a lot about interpreting art. At first when you look at a piece of art, you might not completely understand it. In fact, you may never fully understand it. But if you think about the content of the piece, you may get a better understanding of the purpose or a better idea of what it’s mainly about.

Exhibit 10. Caleveras on Wheels Workshop



Another student, while praising the facilitator, suggested that more opportunities for engagement would have helped:

I didn't enjoy the experience of learning about the dead. I believed that the picture was strange. It wasn't an all-bad presentation. I just thought there could be some improvements. Instead of all of us just listening to someone, maybe we could all take different turns on answering questions. It seemed that some people thought it was long and

not interesting. The woman telling the story was fine, but maybe there could have been more activities or things to involve us.

The second workshop, intended for a mixed-grade group of 12 students from the SEED School of Maryland, did not work out. The school experienced major difficulties when trying to connect with SL, in part because Linden Labs was doing server maintenance that day.

Two useful suggestions came out of the interviews:

- “More engagement opportunities.”
- “Work with schools and teachers to ensure the technical aspects are all worked out before presentations.”

Marionette Workshops

The Marionette workshop, presented by Caesar Ivan, involved a roughly 20-minute dance of marionettes presented in an El Paso theater, streamed live into SLVM on two days during the Festival (see Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11. Marionette Workshop



Eight participants attended the presentation in SL, along with 25 students from Holy Redeemer Catholic School and some 40 visitors in the El Paso theater. The second presentation was delivered to 12 middle-school students at the SEED School of Maryland. Despite some delays because of problems with the sound and other technical difficulties, the workshops were well-implemented and administered.

The audiences, especially the students, enjoyed the show a great deal; most seemed very engaged and curious about it. One interviewee noted that “this presentation was not only entertaining, it also provided effective cultural learning.” Students asked questions about the traditions behind the marionette dance, the materials used for the marionettes, their number, and the presenter’s view of marionettes.

A few students, however, did not much like the set-up. One explained that he did not find the performance interesting, because it was hard to understand and there was insufficient opportunity for students to participate—“I wish that all of the 25 students in the lab could have interacted with the performance artist.” Another student was bored because the performance was too long and, again, there was too little student participation: “I feel this performance would have been better if I or any of the other students were doing it individually. The performance artist should have made the environment kid-friendly when we as 12-year-olds were coming to the virtual museum.” Problems with the sound also detracted from the experience.

Master Percussionist Stacy Fox and the 3D Crystal Skull Dance Party

The Festival also celebrated with activities that were mainly entertainment. One featured a performance by guest musician, educator, and artist Stacy Fox. She also streamed music into SLVM during the Dance Party that took place during and after her performance. Interested visitors in SLVM could teleport from the Map area²⁴ into a party-like space specially designed within a crystal skull dappled with “salsa balls” and with Day of the Dead thematic designs and colorful lights decorating the background. Seventeen avatars attended the party.

The participants contributed to a “vibrant” atmosphere, as one person described it. Even before the event, some participants shouted “Whoooo hooo, Sage!!!!” and clapped in anticipation of Stacy Fox. After the performance, participants described their experience as “Fantastic!,” “wow WOWWOWWOWOWOWOW!!!!!!,” “energizing!,” “very cool indeed!!!!,” and “great fun.” Visitors applauded the outfits, dancing styles, commentary, and other aspects of the performance. For example, one visitor said of the organizer’s costume, “God, you’ve taken the diet a bit far, ha ha!” Others talked about the songs and the memories and emotions associated with them, saying

²⁴ “SKULL TELEPORT 2010: Please press the teleport button when the map appears to move to your destination. It is near the bottom of the map window.”

“that’s my favorite,” “I love that song,” and “ahhhhh, love this song.” One commented that “all of the music put me in a great mood this evening.” Most seemed to share that sentiment.

Exhibit 12. Stacy Fox Performance



Overwhelmingly, the avatars applauded the 3D crystal skull space. “WoW!!!,” “great space!,” “colorful,” “energizing,” and “this is quite a set ☺” are a few of the multitude of congratulatory statements. The avatars seemed completely immersed in the space, dancing, talking, singing, and applauding. The presenter received a lot of acclaim. “Applause!!” called one visitor who attended only this Festival event. Other accolades were “beautiful, Stacey,” “fantastic!!,” “just the right amount of reverb :),” “powerful drumming and singing!,” “wonderful music,” “wonderful drumming and singing Sage!,” and, by one person when leaving, “Kisses, Sage, and thx for a terrific performance.” When the party wound down after an hour or so, overwhelmingly the visitors were in good mood. “Night all, what a fantastic time! Thank you” and “thanks for hosting us” are two quotes from participants after the party.

The main problem with this event was that some participants needed directions on how to get from SLVM to the Crystal Ball. “Where is the teleport?” queried one person. That led to a suggested improvement—better directions. A further suggestion was to add a more visible banner or send out an automatic card on how audiences should engage with the environment (e.g., hear the music, access the salsa balls, and “how can I dance?”).

Recordings of Lila Downs

The Day of the Dead Festival featured a video recording of the 2009 Los Angeles concert of Latino music icon Lila Downs, filmed at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. SLVM staff scheduled two sessions of the recording in SL, the first on October 31 and the second on November 2. The second concert was preceded by a video recording of an oral history interview with Lila Downs conducted by Melissa Carrillo, who also facilitated the session (Exhibit 13).

The October 31 concert started roughly half an hour earlier than scheduled. Thus, when the OP&A observer arrived 10 minutes beforehand, the concert had been going for 20 minutes. The observer saw nine visitors, mostly SLVM staff and content providers, in the space, and they were dancing. A handful of people came in and out. Only five participants (half staff, half visitors) attended the second concert. No one came to the facilitated viewing of the oral history interview with Lila Downs, although avatars could access it at any time.

Some visitors had trouble hearing the music or viewing the concert because they didn't know how to access them or did not have QuickTime installed on their computers. SLVM staff had to repeat the same directions a few times.

Exhibit 13. Oral History Interview with Lila Downs



The participants appeared to enjoy themselves very much. They interacted with one another, commenting on the dancing styles and the person they were dancing with—“we are so cool dancing like this,” said one person. The concert provided an opportunity for friends to catch up with one another or for those new to the group to meet SL aficionados and to socialize. Some

talked about their Spanish-speaking skills, others about Lila Downs, still others about other Latino artists. Some people networked. SLVM staff talked about possibilities of collaborating with other SL stakeholders and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of providing live events in an environment like SL. They also discussed issues with bringing 5th-8th grade students into the environment. A visitor who was unable to hear the concert but who connected very well with the SLVM staff said of her experience, “This has been lovely, even if I couldn’t hear a note.” She continued, “I’m starting to feel right at home here.”

Spectators loved the concert. “That’s a fun show,” “this music is just gorgeous,” “She [Lila Downs] has a great voice,” and “she’s extraordinary” were just a few of the phrases people used to describe what they experienced. For some interviewees, the concert was a good opportunity to learn about Latino artists and hear Lila Downs for the first time. When asked about his experience, one person said, “She’s got a great voice, and her lead guitar player is wonderful.” A couple who decided to have a date at one of the concerts described their experience as “fantastic.”

Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Set-Up During the Day of the Dead Festival

Along with the content and exhibitions from the SLC, the exhibitions in SLVM in SL displayed content and collections from the National Museum of the American Indian, National Museum of American History, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Day of the Dead Festival took place mainly in SLVM’s Music wing, which consisted of the Placita, community altar, and cemetery, the latter having been produced specifically for the Festival. The space provided access to current and culturally relevant information in the form of learning objects—notecards and interactive books—and banners, displays, and videos, as well as hands-on opportunities for trying out new learning.

Overwhelmingly, visitors to SLVM praised its set-up during the Day of the Dead Festival, using words such as “fascinating” and “interesting” to characterize the virtual space. Avatars commented on the space’s design, color, interactivity, and connection to the information made available on Hispanic culture. One experienced SL-er described her thoughts:

[Visitor]: *I love all the detail, the wonderful people involved who are so helpful, the class on the altar making. I met a woman here yesterday who had lost two children who made one [altar]. It made a difference for her. ... and most importantly [there was] the interpretive value of the exhibits.*

[Interviewer]: *You also said “interpretive value of the exhibits.” What do you mean by that?*

[Visitor]: *The notecards and the information in the videos primarily. ... They share the experience of the culture and give meaning to the exhibits.*

Several visitors offered constructive comments on some SLVM features, such as the dysfunctional links and the information placeholders without information. One interviewee said,

Once you're there [in SLVM], there are things that look like they would provide information [but] that don't do anything. It looks like something you would click to teleport, but you don't teleport anywhere. It looks half-abandoned. It looks like a project that's been undertaken and then walked away from in a lot of ways. It's kind of confusing. ... I can see where there's some frustration on the part of the public, and it's based on things that can be fixed.

For one the “sim seems slow” (this person was referring to a situation in which too many avatars are in one space and their movement seemed restricted; it is a Linden Labs problem).

Other technical problems were noted. While some interviewee suggested that the videos should be accessible in any format, other interviewees commented that in order for SL to run smoothly, a person needed a highly able computer with the latest software. Some thought this would impede attendance by users without means.

Overall Design of the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Space

Probably the feature of SLVM that received the most praise during the Festival was the design of SLVM. It was a true experience for veterans and inexperienced users of SL alike. One novice user said, “I haven't participated in any virtual worlds, so this is my first time, but I can tell this is really detailed and a neat set-up,” while an experienced SL avatar, a builder herself, commented, “This build [concert hall] is just excellent!”

Some visitors offered more general comments, such as “You've done a great job of creating the environment and “nice build” or “well done.” Others mentioned specific features such as “the color, the different colors that it presents” and “the marigolds path.” A content provider said her favorite features were “the skeleton and the colors especially,” but also the marigolds. A visitor with lots of SL experience described her positive opinion of the design of the Large Cabana:

[Interviewer]: *What do you like about this pavilion?*

[Visitor]: *It's a good build ... the fabric is perfect. By build I mean design, or actually the physical stuff. The design and the textures used. ... I do a little building, so I'm sensitive to how textures fit onto a build.*

Some appreciated the details and guessed that hard work had gone into designing the space. One visitor said, “On TV the main thing I noticed were the giant skull masks/banners. Here I can see details that aren’t covered by a crowd or a few large skulls on a small screen.”

The Cemetery and the Altars

The cemetery built in SLVM specially for the Day of the Dead Festival was the favorite feature of many interviewees. Notably, while they liked the marigolds, the colors, the costumes, and “the lavishness and number of shrines,” mostly they appreciated the connection it all provided to Latino culture and its “realism.” A very experienced SL user who was also a Latino by heritage

Exhibit 14. The Cemetery



described her experience with the cemetery—“I love the graveyard. ... I love the thought put into it ... I love the color, the different colors that are present, the outfits ... [it] really would

demonstrate much of our culture.” Another visitor to SL of non-Hispanic heritage who came to the Festival to renew her connection with Latino culture commented:

[Visitor]: *The altars are great!*

[Interviewer]: *What did you like about them?*

[Visitor]: *They are very much like the altars I saw in Oaxaca.*

[Interviewer]: *Can you give me an example?*

[Visitor]: *They have all the elements: the marigolds, the photographs, the paper cutouts, the candles and incense.*

Some people commented on the quality of the information about the shrines and praised the opportunity to learn about the people honored in the cemetery in an interactive fashion. The cemetery was a hit with the students, based on observation of them exploring the SLVM space. They appeared quite curious to learn about the people in the cemetery and asked follow-up questions about the people honored in the shrines, as well as about the content and symbolism of the components of the altar.

Readable Information in the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum

SLVM provided information in a very interactive manner. Learning objects—written information available throughout the museum in the form of notecards and interactive books that visitors could take—provided rich background information on Hispanic culture. Many visitors expressed their appreciation of the information in the exhibits. They praised the notecards for their richness, usefulness, and presentation in Spanish and English so that non-Latinos and Latinos alike could learn about Latino culture (Exhibit 15). General comments included “I like the notecards” and “the information in the notecards was useful.”

The following is a representative comment from one interviewee when asked what he liked about the SLVM experience:

[Visitor]: *Most importantly, the interpretive value of the exhibits.*

[Interviewer]: *What do you mean by that?*

[Visitor]: *The notecards and the information in the videos primarily. ... They share the experience of the culture and give meaning to the exhibits.*

An experienced SL user of SecondLife of Latino background appreciated being exposed to the information on Latino culture:

[Visitor]: *I took some of the info cards on the stage. ... Well, the tradition of the “limerick,” Caleveras’ poems, for example, and the poets you had ... it’s a great opportunity to learn a different culture, which is useful.*

Exhibit 15. Example of a Notecard



Video Recordings

The SLVM offered several informational videos presenting elements from and background on Hispanic culture, as well as videos on the Day of the Dead Festival, such as the demonstration on altar building and the oral history interview with Lila Downs. Visitors could access video recordings of presentations and performances by Latino cultural icons, concerts, and interviews such as that with Lila Downs at their own pace. The bilingual ones received high praise because they provided opportunities for all to learn.

Interviewees commented that the video recordings added to the atmosphere of SLVM and provided good information. The fact that visitors could access information in ways comfortable to their learning styles increased their overall satisfaction. For example, one interviewee, when asked about her favorite experience, said she had come to SL to learn Spanish and went on to describe her experience learning from the video recordings:

I viewed the altar and learned about the offerings, I played the congas and watched the video on Afro-Cuban music, and I just got done watching the los Tecuanis dance. So far I think the Afro-Cuban music [is my favorite]. I loved the drums and their [the Afro-Cubans] respect for the environment and the fact that they are keeping their culture alive.

Other visitors to SLVM also talked about how it met their different learning styles and preferences. A very experienced SL user, while appreciating the availability of the videos and acknowledging their appeal to other SL users, spoke of his preference for live events:

[Visitor]: *I don't really like the idea of the videos. I don't know why. ... I love live events. ... It is still interactive if it's live—things can happen, the artist, speaker can react to the audience, not like the preaching of a film.*

[Interviewer]: *For you what seems key is immediate interaction.*

[Visitor]: *Yes, in SL interactive is important.*

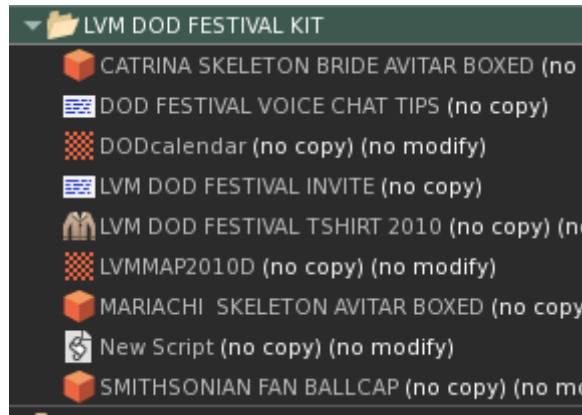
Three criticisms were voiced about the video recordings: “too small and difficult to see,” “take too long to start,” and “should be accessible in any format.”

Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Day of the Dead Festival Kit

Visitors were especially thrilled with the Festival kit, which included free items available in SLVM during the Festival; these items included Day of the Dead outfits, a ball cap, and the signature t-shirt, as well as an invitation to participate, the Festival's map and calendar, and tips on how to use the voice and sound (see Exhibit 16). “The gifts are fantastic,” one experienced SL user offered. For some visitors who found out about the event from a SL listing, the free Day of the Dead outfits were the principal reason for visiting SLVM. Acquiring the free items was not easy for all visitors, however, such as those with limited SL experience. For example, a visitor who found out about the Festival from the SL event list said he had trouble getting the “skeleton outfit” and the t-shirt.

The OP&A study team had some suggestions. The book about the Day of the Dead could also have been provided in the kit, and the kit made available in more spaces so that it was easily accessible wherever people landed.

Exhibit 16. The Festival Kit



The Sandbox for the Altar-Building Kit

An altar-building kit was available to all visitors in the Sandbox, and some visitors used it to build their own altars or collaborate with others to do so. Visitors gave this activity high ratings. By the end of the Festival, eight altars had been built in the Sandbox, four by SLVM staff, three of which were built to host Day of the Dead films and oral histories, and one was built by artist Sage Duncan as a hands-on demonstration with the SEED School of Maryland students. Visitors created still other altars. It is noteworthy that a few mentioned using the kit to build altars in their own “homes” in SL.

People described building an altar as an opportunity for achieving a very rich cultural understanding (see the experiences section above). Learning about a different culture, connecting with their own culture, having freedom of expression, learning SL skills, and being creative were a few of the rich experiences interviewees cited. Because of the strong personal engagement and dedication required in building an altar, some visitors reported coming back to SLVM to review their work and add to or improve it, as well as to see others’ altars. For example, a Hispanic poet who grew up on the border with Mexico but who was not exposed to Latino traditions repeatedly came back to SLVM over several consecutive days to add to the altar he built for his family. He also posted his SL contest-winning poem on the altar. On one trip he made minor changes to the altar and looked to see what other people had built. On a third day he added his grandparents’ marriage license to the altar. Below is a small excerpt from what he said about his intense personal experience building an altar in SLVM’s Sandbox:

Exhibit 17. The Sandbox



[I] never have done that [built an altar] before, so it felt like reconnecting with the culture. ... [It took me] about a couple of hours overall between finding photos and assembling—I'm not a builder... I've never done it in real life ... which is maybe why I enjoyed so much here. ... I would feel strange doing it in real life, but here it was creative. ... These [pictures] are mostly my mother's family.

Another visitor described how she participated:

[Interviewer:] *Did you use it [the kit]?*

[Visitor:] *I did briefly.*

[Interviewer:] *Did it work well for you?*

[Visitor:] *I set it up, then put on a pic[ture] of my dad and took a screenshot of it.*

[Interviewer:] *Would you have liked anything else added to the kit?*

[Visitor:] *I would have no way of knowing what else to add. ... It's not my culture.*

Students and teachers alike praised the altar building as a wonderful interactive learning opportunity; it was novel, offered a high degree of engagement, and provided strong content on culture and symbolism. Said one student, “The altar was a lot of fun, and I liked how we could choose the things we wanted on our altar and be able to design the altar.”

Not everyone had a positive experience. Some visitors, especially those with limited experience in SL and most of the students, were able to use engage in only limited ways, and some not at all. Commented one person, “Well, I drug the box down and opened my altar, but not sure how to get [the] objects.” Another said simply, “I could not build the altar.” Others had a mixed experience—“It was confusing to build the altar, but all in all I liked it very much.” One teacher felt that the energy the students put into figuring out how to use the altar kit took away from their focus on learning the symbolism behind the altar’s features—“They were just so interested in how it went together that they weren’t paying attention to what it was.” Still another person complained,

The altar was “no modify.” I didn’t even bother with it because I wanted to make it a little bit more original, and there was nothing you could do with the stuff in the box except just put it together. I didn’t see any reason to make it, so lacking in the ability to be creative with it. You couldn’t even change the colors of things or anything like that.

Visitors offered some suggestions for improving this activity:

- Provide a video on how to build an altar.
- Offer more freedom in creating the altar.

Scavenger Hunt

Visitors could engage in a scavenger hunt activity that began in the Placita and encouraged people to find information or objects spread around the SLVM space. Several interviewees were impressed by this highly interactive activity, for example, “I was so fascinated by how easy it was to get information by walking to different places and getting the notecards.” Students who tried it seemed to have found it exciting and engaging.

There were two suggestions. One was to make the bilingual notecards available for use in a classroom, especially if there were some kind of reward. Another was to make the title of the activity more visible on the activity’s banner.

Overall Suggestions to Improve the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Environment in Which the Day of the Dead Festival Took Place

- **More interactives:** *“Maybe the kids finding a shard of a piece of pottery and then having to reconstruct the pot—something where they would have to really interact with the artifact, would be a really interesting thing to do.” ♦ “I’d like to see more interactive objects ... It would be cool to let people go through various drawers and pull out objects and look at them, maybe while someone was explaining them.” ♦ “Maybe some things to ride :) Well, maybe like some more interactive stuff like with the dance, maybe you could wear the big head costume and dance :) [...] I would like to actually make some of the*

candy skulls.”

- **More exhibits:** *“I think I would look at focusing on elements people don’t know much about and then change out the exhibit monthly or more often—like maybe a session on Van Gogh that explains a particular painting of his and then move onto something else—we have short attention spans :).”*
- **More information:** Some visitors would have liked more information both about the Day of the Dead Festival and about the SLVM space in SL in which the event took place. One visitor who wanted more information on SLVM in SL said, “I would love more historical and cultural info ... political too :).” Other suggestions were more specific. For example, one veteran SL visitor and poet was interested in getting information on the “Toltecs—the four agreements.” Another experienced SL visitor said, “I saw the musical groups in the gallery behind us ... I would add notecards to those, with information and links to websites where the music can be heard.”
- **More Spanish language:** *“The biggest [opportunity] is language. Because it is the SLVM, I would suggest there be more Spanish content. Maybe have a button to switch languages. That would bring together the whole Latino experience and still allow for other audiences.”*
- **Interdisciplinary material:** *“Always try to bring in as many interdisciplinary ideas as possible. In the schools it [the focus] has been on science and math and reading. But this is an ideal place to incorporate the arts—especially the Day of the Dead, because it has the music. In every project just investigate how as many of the disciplines as possible can be incorporated, because a lot of them are being cut, and teachers are trying to come up with that themselves, but they don’t have the resources available to them to access the information easily. This would be a place where all of the things that are at the Smithsonian would be available for them. ... And the possibility with languages is phenomenal. I took some languages in high school, and I cannot speak them. It needs to become more real, and this could become a place for that.”*
- **More atmosphere, more music, more animation:** Some visitors thought the atmosphere of the Day of the Dead Festival was *“*very* quiet—odd for the celebration. [Add more] music, more sound ... more of the *feel* of the DdlM [Dia de los Muertos]. I’d say smell and taste, but SL isn’t quite there yet :) ... SL is an immersive experience. The best places make it easy to forget you aren’t there in person.”* ♦ *“Nice build ... I wish it had more music”* ♦ *“If you could animate more—or somehow create the illusion that the people or objects come to life.”*

Appendix A: Content Providers and Participating Organizations

Source: Overall Highlights From the 2010 Festival machinema video available at <http://SLVMinteractive.org/VIDEO/DODHIGHLIGHTS.mov>

SLVM Core Team

Melissa Carrillo, Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Creative Director
Olga Herrera, Senior Research Scholar/Curator
Maria Miranda Maloney, Writer/Poet
Nancy Lorenza Green, Educator/Musician/Poet
Mary Lease, Education Curriculum Specialist
Stacey Fox, SLVM Artist
John Noall Reid, SLVM Designer
Arnold Jonas, SLVM Designer

Guests Research Scholars and Curators

Jane M. Walsh (National Museum of Natural History)
Cynthia Vidaurri (National Museum of the American Indian)
Evelyn Figueroa (Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service)
Tracy Grimm (UND)

SLVM Day of the Dead Festival Collaborator

Nancy McDonald, Director of Virtual Native Lands in Second Life

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Jack Galindo
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Jose Marquez
Nancy Lorenza Green
Cesar Ivan
Valentin Sandoval
Lucille Zavala, Rincon Bohemio
Monica Gomez, State of the Arts (National Public Radio)
Isela Laca
Rosa Isela Castaneda
Jasmine Castaneda
Brian Hopple
Amalio Madueno
Roberto Santos
(BarbedWire Series)
Shannon Elizabeth
Hardwick
Jeniffer Stapher-Thomas
Lisa Digliantoni

Rincon Bohemio Members

Guadalupe Valenzuela
Sonja Wayne
Raquel Mejia
Lydia Zavala
Julie Quintanar
Eloisa Robledo
Jorge Guzman
Gene Keller
Griselda Flores
Raymond C. Sweisford
Dolores Dorantes
Griselda Rodriquez
Karla Lopez

Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum Pilot School Test Sites Participants

Holy Redeemer Catholic School, Maryland

Mary Del Bianco, Technology Educator

The SEED School of Maryland

Gerald Kountz, Head of School
Jennifer Huff
Loretta Rodriguez
Kim Worth, Educator

University of Notre Dame
Tracy Grimm, Archivist

Appendix B: Assessment Instruments

Instrument 1. Observation Form—Day (completed for each day of the Day of the Dead Festival)

Observers:

Avatar Name:

Day:

Time:

General Notes:

How many avatars are there (record their names)? At what times? What do they do?

Thoughts on visitors' engagement with the site/program:

Observers' personal thoughts about the day:

Include the number of avatars interviewed, their names, and notes to this sheet.

Copy and paste public chat:

Instrument 2. Observation Form—Event
(completed for each event offered during the Day of the Dead Festival)

Observers:

Avatar Name:

Event Title:

Day:

Time:

Number of participants at the beginning of event (record avatar names):

**Number of participants in the middle of event (hopefully representing peak participation)
(record avatar names):**

Number of participants at the end of event (record avatar names):

Comments on the implementation of the event: Did it start on time? Any technical difficulties? Any other thoughts on program administration, organization, etc.? (Provide examples.)

Thoughts on participants and their engagement with the site/program:

Other notes:

Observers' personal thoughts about the event:

Copy and paste public chat:

Instrument 3. Interview Guide for Avatars

Topics interviewees should raise with SLVM visitors, not necessarily in chronological order:

Satisfaction with the site:

What do you think of your experience with the SLVM?

What did you like most about your experience?

Experience with SLVM (experience with SL also desirable):

Have you been to the SLVM before? When? For what purpose?

How has it changed? Any comparative thoughts regarding previous iterations of SLVM and especially of DoD circa 2009?

Visit:

Why did you visit SLVM/DoD today? How did you find out about it?

What did you do while in the SLVM? Any activities specifically?

Query about the following aspects of SLVM:

Navigation

Conceptual design, organization

Visual display of the landscape

Opportunities for engagement, interaction, participation, socialization

Learning opportunities

Content: Is there anything that surprised you? Anything new that you learned?

General

Thinking about your visit, what did you find most valuable, and why?

What did you find least valuable, and why?

What aspects (content/materials/tools) of SLVM would you improve or expand?

Other?

Instrument 4. Interview Guide for Content Providers

Topics interviewees should raise with SLVM content providers, not necessarily in chronological order:

Experience with SLVM (experience with SL also desirable):

How did you hear of the Latino Virtual Museum? What about the Day of the Dead Festival?

Have you been to the SLVM before? When? For what purpose?

How has it changed? Any comparative thoughts regarding previous iterations of SLVM and especially of DoD circa 2009?

Satisfaction with the site:

What do you think of your experience with the SLVM/DoD Festival?

What did you like most about your experience?

Visit:

What did you do while at DoD? Any particular activities?

Thinking about your experience at DoD, what did you find most valuable, and why?

What did you find least valuable, and why?

What aspects (content/materials/tools) of SLVM would you improve or expand?

Future visit:

Would you consider visiting SLVM again? Why or why not? Under what circumstances?

What are the main benefits of participating/performing on this site? Are there any disadvantages?

Query about the following aspects of SLVM:

Navigation

Conceptual design, organization

Visual display of the landscape

Opportunities for engagement, interaction, participation, socialization

Learning opportunities

Content: Is there anything that surprised you? Anything new that you learned?

Other? Are there any other comments that you would like offer? Any other suggestions?

Appendix C: Survey Form

Please give us feedback by completing the following THREE questions.

1. Is this your first time to the Latino Virtual Museum?
 Yes
 No

2. Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience in SLVM during the Day of the Dead Festival?
 Poor Fair Good Excellent Superior

3. Do you plan to visit SLVM in the future?
 No
 I don't know
 Yes