Are We There Yet?: Interaction Can Make the Journey Fun and the Destination Worth Seeking
Paper presented at LIANZA Conference 2001
Passion, People and Power: Te Ihi, Te Wehi, Te Wana
at Wellington, New Zealand,
1 November 2011

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Citation
Abstract

Librarians are facing a threat from information seekers who do not see their services as the first place to seek information. They are not alone. Museums are facing funding cuts and need to justify their existence. Journalists face competition from news aggregators who redirect traffic from their websites. Statistical publishers have information seekers who could use their data, but do not like numbers. For these professions, the solution has been to develop ways to enhance user interaction with their digital and physical sites.

This paper will look at examples of storytelling, visualisation and interactivity from these professions to illustrate ways to make the search for information a more enjoyable journey. People can also discover their own meaning in the resources.

Librarians can also use storytelling, visualisation and interactivity to empower information seekers, encouraging them to explore further, find new information and maybe return next time. David Pattern, from the University of Huddersfield (2009), put it best when he said “Let people find what they want, but let them get entertainingly lost.”

Storytelling: making the journey fun

Museum curators understand that getting recognition for their artefacts can involve partnerships with others. Take, for example, the China Heart exhibition of early 2011. This exhibition was created by d/Lux Media Arts to coincide with the 2011 City of Sydney Chinese New Year events. d/Lux/MediaArts used resources from 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, the Powerhouse Museum and the Project Factory, together with support from Screen NSW, Screen Australia, the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority and City of Sydney to create an interactive story which was triggered by GPS locations.

The story was crafted to include four of the objects from the Powerhouse Museum. It involves Lian, who receives a strange present at her engagement party. She sets out to solve the mystery and visitors travel with her through videos showing her progress. Starting at the Powerhouse Museum, the application is downloaded to a GPS-enabled phone. By walking around Sydney’s Chinatown, visitors experience Lian’s story and follow the clues with her. Along the way, they learn about the places and people around them such as the clan houses. They are also introduced to artefacts from the museum’s collection such as the fan, which shows two ducks swimming to symbolise a happy marriage and is intertwined with the story of the marriage of Lian’s parents.
Combining geographic locations in Chinatown and objects such as the fan creates an interactive experience for those travelling around Chinatown and experiencing with Lian the unravelling of the mystery present. The partnership with d/Lux Media Arts enabled the museum to contribute to an interactive story which encouraged the user to continue the journey and discover more.

Storytelling has power beyond the words used to tell the story. A story can evoke past experiences for each user, giving everyone a unique experience. Storytelling is a great way to take users on a journey and to keep them engaged.

Libraries and storytelling

How can we make use of storytelling in a library setting? At Statistics New Zealand library, we use storytelling in many ways and would like to develop more.

For our What’s new from the library newsletter, we work hard at crafting engaging abstracts. Crafting an abstract with user engagement in mind means telling the story they want to hear. This may not be a summary of the content. Rather it will be why it is important to the users of our library. We consider why we chose to buy, download or link to a resource and then let others know why they might like it. How do we know this works? We use short urls on the web section of our What’s new from the library. Shortening the urls using the DigBig site enables us to measure the increase in click throughs following the change in the style of the abstracts. As an added bonus, we can see which words are buzz words with our staff and eventually predict traffic based on the wording of the abstract and the title content.

One year for Library Week, we invited users to send us their stories of library engagement. We used a montage of library images as a starting point and clicked through to stories of favourite books, libraries, and librarians. We varied the stories behind the links and encouraged others to tell their stories too. Who knew that statisticians could be such engaging raconteurs?
Another idea we would like to try is using archetypes and stories in presentations and training sessions. In his video Create an effective presentation, Nick Morgan (2011) says that there are only five kinds of stories you can tell: stranger in a strange land, revenge, love story, rags to riches or quest. So how would this work in a library setting? Stranger in a strange land and quest are good frameworks for training resources. Training screen shots could be combined with audio commentary in a Microsoft PowerPoint. All you need is a microphone because adding audio is a standard component of the Microsoft PowerPoint suite. It is easier than you think.

For illustrating reference skills, the quest story works well. For example, adding a commentary telling the story of a student or staff member struggling to find the resources they need for an essay or project and finally succeeding.

For a presentation on budget cuts to the board, take Nancy Duarte’s (2010) advice and treat the presentation as a story not a report. This means telling the story of the library and its quest to provide support or the organisation. This could cover the threats to the organisation that the library has helped avert or just the ups and downs of the journey so far. The figures and detail can be provided in a separate report.

Finally, digital storytelling can make a story even more engaging. Digital storytelling involves telling a story over photographs or film. Diane Walker (2009) has used photos from her past and present to share her story and in doing so to demonstrate the importance of her library to her clients.
Crafting your presentations as stories requires skills in areas which librarians do not always feel confident. However, taking people on a journey increases the chances of engagement and the rewards will be worth moving out of your comfort zone.

**Visualisation: finding the stories in the data**

Next, let us turn to statistical publishers and the ways they have developed to engage with potential users. Statisticians love data, but the people who need to use their data are not always so keen. Statistical publishers are using interactive data visualisations to engage users. Until the development of the web, it was not possible to share all possible combinations of data variables or to show them in a way that people could understand. Now, people can select their own data and then view the results.

The Gapminder website allows visitors to make their data selections and then watch the changes over time. They can pick one variable like a country or pick several for comparison. Movement is a great way to engage users and allowing them to pick and choose variables and then see what effect it has on the graphs makes learning fun. It also allows users to find their own stories in the data rather than relying on statisticians to tell them what the story should be.

Statistics New Zealand’s interactive boundary maps allow users to see a map using different shades of colour to show the density of the data they have chosen. Users can change the area and see the changes in the maps.

Business toolbox gives users even more choice. There are a huge number of variables and areas which enables users to build their own datasets. They can then see the data reflected on the map. They can change the variables and see the effects on the map. Although the tool is intended for businesses to find potential markets, the market mapper tool can be used by anyone who wants to discover data about age, sex, ethnicity, income, families and household composition for areas in New Zealand. Interactivity means users are more likely to go back and try other variables or look at other areas, making the journey to find statistical information more fun.

**Figure 3**
Interactivity as seen in Business Toolbox
Libraries and data visualisation

Librarians like to work with words. However, data visualisations can improve the experience for our users. Why not start with visualisations of words?

Tag clouds are a great way for librarians to allow their users to interact with catalogue records and to visualise the most popular search terms on their sites. It can be a valuable way of finding out the words people use to search for library resources and what engages their attention.

However, not everyone has the software or IT support to do this. Try pasting your carefully crafted abstract into the Tagxedo website to have a tag cloud visualisation of your abstract and therefore the resource. Tagxedo offers a wide range of styles, colours and fonts. You can even choose the shape of your tag cloud. When you have made your choices, copy and paste it into your catalogue record or library newsletter.

Figure 4
Tagxedo tag cloud of the most common words in this paper

If you are prepared to share the intellectual property of your presentation and it is not confidential, the Prezi website is a great way to engage your viewers in a visual journey. Having mapped out the story you want to tell, you can now visualise it any way you want to on a large canvas. If you remove the predictability of one PowerPoint slide following another, you can focus more of your viewers’ attention on what you are presenting. If Prezi does not work in your environment, you can create your presentation as an image using screen capture software and edit the image to add in the url links. SnagIt allows you to save the image as a PDF.
For those who would like a more advanced application of visualisation, David Patten (2008) has some beautiful data visualisations. Some of my personal favourites are Dewey heat maps with red for low usage and green for high usage and book titles borrowed arranged in Dewey order and coloured by the faculty of the borrower. For this paper, I have chosen his Dewey friendship wheels which visualise the interaction between borrowing one book and another book. He has taken the friendship wheel idea from Facebook and Twitter and created a Dewey wheel to show which Dewey numbers were linked to other Dewey numbers.
Interactivity: letting users find and share their own stories

Museum curators and statisticians are not the only ones who have moved out of their comfort zones. Journalists have been forced to evaluate their service and learn new skills. They have always told stories with words, but today telling stories with words is under threat from internet news sites. Journalists have been re-evaluating their strengths. The more successful have determined their strength to be in-depth, neutral reporting backed by facts. This has seen a move to including more data in their arsenal.

Data-driven journalism is now becoming the hallmark of some of the more successful newspaper sites. Papers like the Guardian and the New York Times and websites like the BBC have realised that visualising data and allowing viewers to interact with it has the power to express the underlying story in a powerful way, which drives traffic to their sites.

Visualisation provides a different way to engage with information seekers. Amanda Cox (2011) from the New York Times has talked about the advantages of visualisations over using words or showing the data in print. She talks about the power of sound and movement. She wants data visualisation to allow people to see a more personal view of the data and maybe a different story.

The “Jobless rate for people like you” data visualisation (2009) from the New York Times shows how the internet has enabled journalists to take a huge quantity of data and allow people to experience their personal part of it. People start by picking personal characteristics to see how their situation relates to the jobless rate. Often they may then go back and look at how others are faring, expanding their awareness of the unemployment situation in the United States and also increasing their time on the site.

For the New York Times’ (2011) “The Death of a Terrorist: A Turning Point?” interactive graphic, readers were invited to respond to the following question about Osama bin Laden’s death. “Was
his death significant in our war against terror? And do you have a negative or positive view of this event?". Readers — 13,864 of them — answered by plotting a response on the graph and adding a comment to explain the choice. The answers were visualised to show the both the big picture (with shading) and each response (with mouse-overs to allow interaction with each comment). This is one of the New York Times simpler visualisations, but it draws the viewer in, encouraging interaction with the responses and maybe a better understanding of why people chose a particular place on the scale.

Libraries and interactivity

Interaction has the potential to engage library users in the journey as well as the destination. Social networking software has opened up a range of possibilities for librarians with a presence on the web to engage with their clients. Take Diigo. This is a bookmarking website with a difference. It enables librarians to create communities of practice and then support them by sharing relevant links to websites and journal articles. Comments can be added and text highlighted for any link. Even better, others in the group can add to the group’s knowledgebase as well.

Surveys are an opportunity to hear what your clients have to say. Sites like Survey Monkey provide a variety of ways to survey clients for their opinions. The first 100 responses are free and then there is a small cost for access to more responses and tools. Get users to vote for their favourite book, then graph the results like the Osama example from the New York Times.

Finally, LibraryThing for libraries allows librarians to utilise user reviews and user-defined tags in library websites. The Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library Service website implementation is a good example of this. Once you find a book you like, you can read what others thought of it, look at the user tags to see if this is a book you would enjoy or click the tags to see other books of interest. This makes it more likely that a user will decide to check out other books using the same tags or to reserve a book with a good review.

Conclusion

Librarians often feel under threat because there are alternatives to their services. However, other professions have similar issues and we can follow their example.

News sites on the internet forced journalists to look at their strengths in a new way. Some decided that they could compete if they produced authoritative background stories grounded by data. This meant supplementing their expertise with new areas of learning: data and the tools to visualise it.

Statisticians had to learn to create stories around their data, but also to let go control of the data and create tools which allowed users to find their own stories.

Those working in museums have embraced technology and often partner with others to create exciting interactive stories to encourage interaction with their artefacts.

So what do we, as librarians, need to do? We need to re-evaluate our strengths. We are more than search machines so we do not need to fear Google. Searchers no longer want a Wild West internet. They are time poor and want authoritative sources to search but they have high expectations of the search experience. They want it to be intuitive and they want to be in control.

Librarians have the body of knowledge to create this world. However, it might mean moving out of our comfort zone and giving up some of the ways we like to work.

We can start with small changes to engage our users. We can read books and blogs or check out the work of other librarians to inspire changes in our libraries. With inspiration and confidence comes an opportunity to try more complex changes and to share these with others.

We may not be there yet, but like our users we are on a journey and like them we can enjoy the journey as much as the destination.
Websites to inspire your journey

**Storytelling**


Walker, D (2009). La Pintoresca Libray, Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25Ftohyl-0g

**Visualisation**


**Interactivity**


Other links mentioned in paper

