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A “Novel” Approach to Recreational Reading

Creating a Virtual Collection on a Shoestring

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Guest Columnists

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The implementation of readers' advisory services in academic libraries continues to expand. Libraries have developed a variety of innovative projects that support students' recreational reading interests and promote academic libraries to their user communities. Here, Sarah Dahlen and Steve Watkins discuss the creation of an online portal to an academic library's recreational reading collection, enhancing user access, improving circulation, and offering a model for reaching their library community in new ways.—Editor

Providing recreational reading materials for patrons, while squarely within the purview of public libraries, has not been a goal equally embraced by academic libraries. Despite its connections to academic achievement and lifelong learning, many academic libraries either do not consider recreational reading as vital to their mission or, more likely, do not have the funds to pursue its promotion. An affordable option (costing only minimal staff time) is to create a virtual collection of print recreational reading materials that, through an online interface, allows patrons to browse for titles by genre or book cover. This virtual solution complements catalog searching by attempting to simulate a browsing experience similar to what one would find in a bookstore or physical library collection. We recently implemented this solution at our institution, a small, public university in California, with some success. By dynamically compiling records of titles previously purchased by the library to support the humanities and education curricula, we are able to highlight books belonging to genres that are often of interest to recreational readers. This article addresses the justification for investing staff time in promoting recreational reading, discusses the technology employed to create and maintain this virtual collection, and shares the impacts of this effort on circulation of the items included in the collection.

THE VALUE OF RECREATIONAL READING

The benefits of reading are undeniable. There are well documented links between recreational reading and improved writing skills, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension as noted by Krashen and others.¹ Dewan, among others, has noted that academic libraries are the clear candidates to provide and promote this service, especially given that college students are unlikely to take advantage of public libraries for their recreational reading needs.²

Not surprisingly, given the benefits of recreational reading, many academic libraries provide a recreational collection

for their users. While views on academic libraries' role in promoting leisure reading have varied through the decades, recent surveys suggest that a clear majority of academic libraries see this as being within their purview.³ In a national survey executed by Julie Elliott, 71 percent of academic libraries reported maintaining separate recreational browsing collections; 64 percent reported the same in a survey of three southeastern states conducted by Mark Sanders.⁴ A number of creative approaches to providing recreational reading collections have been documented, including book leasing programs, donations from public libraries, and book exchanges.⁵ High circulation rates have been associated with some of these efforts.⁶ Short of providing a separate collection, other methods of promoting recreational reading are also noted in the literature, including displays, cozy reading areas, extended circulation periods, and book lists.⁷ The advantages of a separate collection are notable, however, considering the shortcomings of the Library of Congress Classification system for browsing fiction and the greater likelihood of discovery by students when collections are placed in a prominent location.⁸

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background

Established in 1994, California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB) is a public university located on California's central coast. In Fall 2011, when our virtual recreational reading collection was initially implemented, enrollment was just under 5,000 students, 96 percent of whom were undergraduates. The Tanimura and Antle Family Memorial Library has seven full-time librarians and seven library staff. There has been a longstanding desire among some of the librarians to provide a recreational reading collection, but we faced many barriers common to academic libraries. Our book budget for 2012–13, for example, was a mere \$56,000, all of which was understandably allocated for the purchase of materials supporting the curriculum. A book leasing program was identified as being a good fit for our library's needs, but a fundraising request to underwrite such a program was unsuccessful.

Like most academic libraries, ours holds a number of fiction titles that have been purchased over the years to support literature and education courses, and we realized that many of these titles would be of interest to the campus community for recreational reading purposes. We initially wanted to collocate these titles in a separate area to facilitate browsing and discovery by library users, but the need for additional space, book shelves, and staff time made this option untenable. Instead, we devised a way to create a virtual collection that would allow library users to browse and discover fiction while maintaining the books in their original shelf locations (<http://library2.csUMB.edu/read>).

Design Goals

In contrast to the search and display options in the library's

online catalog, we wanted to offer users the ability to browse the virtual recreational reading collection by title or book cover, akin to a bookstore or the library shelves. Because we anticipated that many users would approach the collection without a specific title or genre in mind, we also wanted to promote serendipitous random discovery along the lines of Oregon State University Library's Book Genie (<http://genie.library.oregonstate.edu>). We also wanted to design the display of search results to be aesthetically pleasing, brief, and easy to scan. We therefore focused on a short list of key elements of bibliographic records for works of fiction: book cover images; author, title, date, and call number; and a descriptive paragraph about the plot and characters. We intentionally did not replicate the library catalog record display, as many fields included there make the records difficult to scan.

Genre Headings

According to the MARC 21 Format for Bibliographic Data, "A *genre term* designates the style or technique of the intellectual content of textual materials."⁹ As in our experience, most academic libraries will likely find that genre headings have already been included in many of their catalog records for works of fiction. OCLC ResearchWorks created a pilot site for access to WorldCat records via genre headings (www.worldcat.org/genres), sorted according to their popularity in WorldCat. WorldCat Genres provided a proof of concept that supported the feasibility of developing a similar service for our local collection.

The 87 genres OCLC designated to describe books and film range from the broad categories of *love stories* and *mystery fiction* to more specific categories such as *Arthurian romances* and *steampunk fiction*. We selected a subset of these genres to match the specificities of our collection and the interests of our user community. A search of our catalog revealed as many as 384 titles in a single genre (*domestic fiction*, used by OCLC to describe "fictional works that focus on home and family life"), and a number of genres with no titles at all (e.g. *regency fiction*, *road fiction*, *chick lit*). We settled on 17 book genres based on their anticipated popularity and their representation in our library's holdings. In a few cases, we combined related genres: *love stories* and *romances* became "Love and Romance," *horror fiction* and *suspense fiction* became "Horror and Suspense," and *autobiographical fiction* was combined with *biographical fiction* in the category "Fiction about Real People." The naming of this last choice reflects another issue that we faced: not all of OCLC's genre labels would have obvious appeal for our users. This led to some renaming of genres, which in certain cases was as simple as changing *adventure fiction* to "Adventures," or as straightforward as translating *bildungsromans* to "Coming of Age Novels." *Domestic fiction* was one of our biggest challenges, and we eventually settled on "Novels of Home and Family."

In addition to developing naming conventions for various genres, libraries considering the development of a virtual recreational reading collection will want to consider which

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search options to use to retrieve genre titles from their catalog system. For our project, we tested three types of search for each genre to determine which produced the best, most relevant list of titles: subject keyword, exact genre heading, and general keyword. In most instances we decided on exact genre heading searches because they are quite effective in separating works in the genre from works about the genre. In other instances, such as short stories, genre headings had not been consistently added to the catalog records and a general keyword search produced the best results.

Technical Overview

The CSU Monterey Bay Library uses the Voyager integrated library system from Ex Libris that offers a series of application programming interfaces (APIs) that enable direct interaction with and retrieval of Voyager data, be it patron records, book renewals, or bibliographic records. The APIs are exposed as web services that can be queried using standard web protocols, making it possible to write scripts to retrieve and process the desired records and data fields as needed.

The PHP scripting language includes a set of client URL (cURL) functions that provide a secure method to establish a connection to the server, send the necessary commands to the API, and retrieve and capture the results in XML format.¹⁰ A single, moderately complex PHP script drives the entire functionality behind the browseable virtual collection. The script receives as input the genre heading and type of index from the links in the public user interface and uses them to construct the API query to retrieve matching items from the library catalog database. Another PHP function, SimpleXML (<http://php.net/manual/en/book.simplexml.php>), is used to parse the resulting XML records to extract the contents of the specific fields needed to create the formatted list of titles and display them to the user as a plain HTML webpage.

Similar APIs may or not be available to libraries with integrated library systems from vendors other than Ex Libris. In their absence, real-time retrieval of selective bibliographic records for recreational reading titles may not be feasible, but alternate strategies may be possible. Batch export of the relevant records may be an option, from which static webpages could be constructed to facilitate browsing. The bibliographic information could readily be combined with book cover images and book jacket descriptions, as outlined below, with links back to the library catalog for circulation status.

Because of the functionality of the Voyager APIs, we decided to implement real-time retrieval of the desired bibliographic records rather than creating static webpages that require regular updating. As newly acquired titles are added to the collection, they automatically appear in the genre lists, albeit with only a generic book cover image. We judged that it would be advantageous for users to be able to discover such new titles even if some of the accompanying display elements were to be added later.

Book cover images are available from a variety of third parties, including commercial services, but the lack of funding for



Figure 1. Recreational reading website, main page, <http://library2.csumb.edu/read>

this project dictated that we explore free or open-source options. Because the browsing lists of some of our genres number in the several hundreds of records, pulling in book covers for each title on the fly from an external source was deemed impractical. The user interface would be more responsive if we could locate and match the cover images to download and store them locally and we would not place undue loads on the provider's services. After exploring several options, the Open Library project was identified as the best source for gathering cover images.¹¹ A second PHP script uses the Voyager APIs to capture the ISBN for each title, which is sent to the Open Library's cover image API to retrieve an image when a match is found. The script sends a complete set of ISBN queries only once, during the initial stage of gathering images. For subsequent updates, the script sends queries for only those titles for which an image has not already been obtained, greatly reducing the potential load on the remote servers.

For similar reasons, we also chose to periodically download book descriptions to local storage, then insert them on the fly into the user display along with the book cover images. While the local catalog records for many of our recreational reading titles contain plot and character descriptions, they are not retrievable via the Voyager APIs. A third PHP script uses the ISBN for each title to query an OCLC WorldCat web service to check for and retrieve book descriptions from the corresponding records in WorldCat to which our library holdings are already attached.¹² Like the book cover script, it incorporates pauses between each query and only sends queries for titles for which a description has not already been obtained.

When a user visits the recreational reading landing page, five book cover images are chosen at random for display at the top of the page to facilitate serendipitous discovery of titles from across the entire collection. A list of genres is presented along with images that hopefully evoke a visual sense of what each genre is about (see figure 1). Clicking on a genre builds a webpage on the fly, with five new cover images drawn randomly from among the titles in that genre, brief bibliographic information, and thumbnail cover images and



Figure 2. Recreational reading website, mystery genre page, <http://library2.csUMB.edu/voyager/readinglist.php?genre=mystery&fiction&index=655H>

book descriptions inserted from local storage into the entry for each title (see figure 2).

Recognizing that many of our users access library services and resources via their phones or other mobile devices, we deemed it important to offer a parallel mobile version of the virtual recreational reading collection (see figure 3). Most of the underlying functionality of the full-scale web version lent itself readily to reformatting to display on the smaller screens of mobile devices. However, we decided to display only three random book cover images at the top of each screen and to truncate the book descriptions at 300 characters to prevent the title lists from becoming too lengthy. To give users a good sense of the titles in each genre, only the first 25 are initially retrieved for display, reducing the amount of data transmitted for the initial display while offering the option to subsequently retrieve the entire list of titles in the genre.

The recreational reading homepage also provides links to the websites of local public libraries and their book recommender services. Since the public library collections are much richer in recreational content than our university library collection, campus users benefit from knowing that there are broader resources available to them nearby. Lastly, a disclaimer was added to the bottom of the page to avert any misperceptions that state university funds were being inappropriately spent for nonacademic purposes:

These titles were acquired by the library in support of the CSUMB curriculum and based on their academic and literary merit. Because they belong to genres that are often of interest to recreational readers, the library has gathered them here for your convenience.

Promotion

With any new library service, promotion is key for user

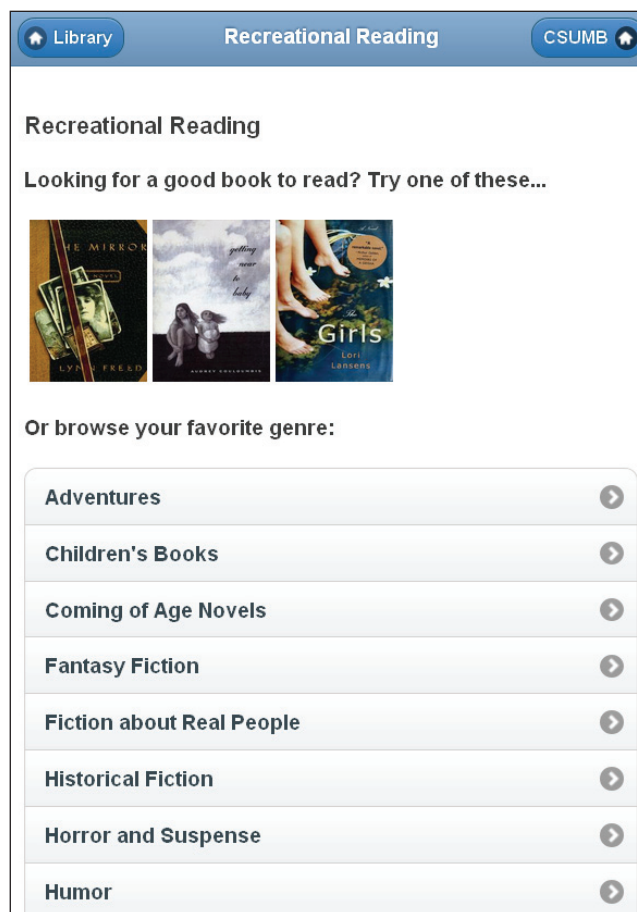


Figure 3. Mobile version of website

adoption. This is particularly true for a virtual collection like ours that is located two clicks away from the homepage in the website navigational hierarchy. Dewan and Sanders have both shared ideas for promoting recreational collections, and some of the strategies we implemented at CSUMB were similar.¹³ We designed and printed bookmarks featuring some of the book jackets of titles in the collection along with the website URL and a QR code linking to the mobile version of the site (see figure 4). The \$200 spent on printing the bookmarks, which are made available at the reference and circulation desks, was the sole expenditure on this project. We also wrote up a brief news item and posted it to the library website, on the computer kiosks in the library, and to the campus online staff and faculty announcement board. Greater efforts were warranted when the virtual collection was first introduced, but we periodically spotlight the collection on the library homepage to maintain awareness among users.

RESULTS

Having actively promoted the virtual reading site, we wanted to measure the impact, if any, on the rate at which books in



Figure 4. Promotional bookmarks

the collection circulated. Fortunately, the Voyager APIs also enable one to retrieve usage statistics for the titles in each genre. Just before going live with the site at the start of the 2011–12 academic year, benchmark circulation data were generated for the two preceding years, giving us an average annual rate of circulation for each genre. Twelve months later another set of circulation data was generated for comparison. As table 1 illustrates, most genre collections experienced an increase in use during the first year the virtual collection was available, particularly Mysteries, Short Stories, Love and Romance, and Humor. We saw a 21.6 percent increase in circulation, a strong indication that organizing, presenting, and promoting these materials succeeded in bringing them to the attention of our user community.

There are several factors that may have contributed to the success of this project, as measured by the increased circulation of the collection. Most simply, the virtual collection has given users one additional path to discover titles of interest. We suspect that browsing, rather than searching, appeals to many users who are looking for leisure reading materials. The visual appeal of book covers plays a large role in browsing at a bookstore or public library, and the inclusion of book covers on our webpage replicates that appeal to the user's visual aesthetic. Those users who are reluctant to ask a librarian for assistance may appreciate the self-service approach to getting a book recommendation. Additionally, our publicity of the recreational reading collection may have served as a timely reminder to users that the library provides materials beyond their coursework needs.

While reference librarians at CSUMB do not receive a large number of readers' advisory questions, we have embraced this new tool for those questions that do arise. Many of us have not had formal training in providing readers' advisory, and the virtual collection has proved useful for assisting students looking for reading recommendations. Many of the users introduced to this tool at the reference desk have expressed their enthusiasm for it as well.

Table 1. Change in circulation for each genre

Genre	Number of Titles	Net Change in Circulation
Adventures	53	-27.0%
Children's Books	531	-1.3%
Coming of Age Novels	176	56.5%
Fantasy Fiction	129	21.7%
Fiction about Real People	127	-37.4%
Historical Fiction	380	-22.7%
Horror and Suspense	44	46.1%
Humor	115	73.9%
Love and Romance	203	81.2%
Mysteries	101	126.1%
Novels of Home and Family	413	36.2%
Political Stories	96	14.8%
Psychological Novels	278	14.8%
Science Fiction	153	29.5%
Short Stories	347	82.6%
War Stories	79	49.1%
Westerns	62	-21.7%
Totals	3,287	21.6%

Note: Some titles belong to multiple genres.

CONCLUSION

There are compelling reasons for academic libraries to facilitate access to recreational reading for their users, including its connections to academic achievement and its potential as a public relations tool. While some academic libraries are able to provide a separate collection for users' leisure reading needs, others are confronted by lack of funding, inadequate space, and other barriers. These may be overcome through the creation of a virtual recreational reading collection that enables user discovery by making the fiction titles already present on the library shelves browseable by genre. A set of PHP scripts, along with the affordances of the Voyager catalog, makes this a relatively straightforward proposition. While it would be difficult to measure any direct impact that our recreational reading website might have on academic achievement or public relations, we were pleased to observe an increase in circulation of the books included in the collection, suggesting additional awareness of, and interest in, these titles. In addition, the librarians at our institution have found the collection helpful for fielding readers' advisory questions at the reference desk, an area in which academic librarians are not always well versed.

As we were planning and designing this virtual collection, we conceived of a number of enhancements that were not realized in our initial implementation. Our ideal online browsing collection would include the feature films in our

collection, nonfiction of popular interest, and free content, such as that provided by Project Gutenberg or Google Books. Additional features might include interactive user options, like tagging and social media integration, or a readers' advisory function that would generate a book suggestion based on what a reader has enjoyed previously. Technological barriers to implementation prompted us to leave these features out of our virtual collection website, but they are potential avenues for future enhancement.

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