Welcome to LIBRARY ISLAND

By Matt Finch

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WELCOME TO LIBRARY ISLAND

It was just another day on Library Island. In the towns of Pulpchester, Folio, and Little Codex, the collections were being maintained, programmes were offered to the community, and items for loan were flying out the door. Life was good for the island's librarians.

Then the floods came. And the political agitators. And the increasing demands for recognition and justice from the island's Indigenous population. Then the mysterious, desperate people speaking a language no-one seemed to recognise. And then the Ministry of Shelves began to make ominous noises about cutting library budgets…

This unique activity allows participants to explore how an institution serves its stakeholders in a make-believe setting.

This open-ended **roleplay** allows participants to safely explore challenging questions of:

- civil rights and activism
- natural disasters and emergency response
- institutional values, funding, and politics
- labour relations
- social justice, and
- turbulent political environments.

To operate in a sustainable, resilient manner through turbulent times, institutions require **a sense of mission** which is agile, responsive, and built on both empathy and the recognition that the future is not set in stone.

Library Island is a radically open-ended and **unpredictable scenario exercise** which allows participants to take the roles of staff, community members, and other stakeholders in the library service of an imaginary island.

The initial wide-ranging scenario provided here can be **tailored to your community, sector, or industry**.

Library Island, by creating a turbulent and unpredictable fictional situation where participants must adapt to fast-moving contexts, builds **organisational resilience and agility**. The lively activity elicits new ideas, encourages empathy, and allows participants to negotiate difficult professional situations and potential conflicts within the safe space of make-believe play.

A Library Island session encourages participants to think holistically about their institution and the community they serve, recognising the messiness of the real world and encouraging **a strategic point of view** at all levels of service.

Do I need a library to play this game? Do I need to *be* a librarian?

No! Library Island was originally devised at the State Library of Queensland, Australia but **it can be adapted** for use with **other organisations such as healthcare providers, public services, colleges, universities**, and any institution which serves a community.

Library Island has been played with medics and allied health workers, museum professionals, community activists, and higher education staff amongst others.

Any group of people can use it to identify organisational challenges and explore difficult professional issues, as well as generating and testing new ideas.

How many people can play this game?

We'd recommend **no fewer than 15 players** for a decent game of Library Island - and beyond that, the sky is the limit. We've played satisfying and useful games of Library Island with as many as 100 participants.

How long does a game take?

We'd recommend **a minimum of 2 hours** for a good game of Library Island. A half day session would allow for more substantial exploration of the setting - and Library Island can also be built into a wider day-long session of strategic planning and innovation.

What do I need to play this game?

You'll need **a space large enough for all your players to move around in**, and furniture to represent three libraries and the "Ministry of Shelves" - tables and chairs will do.

The game is played using **paper handouts**:

- Character sheets representing community members
- Funding forms for the Ministry of Shelves
- Collection item sheets
- Library programme sheets

You'll also need **some blank paper** - copy paper will suffice.

Session leaders can create their own handouts & materials, get participants to create the materials themselves, or use the starter pack at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/xu83w74gw17u7iv/AAA7JodyK7zOgjDdTPhLTj0-a?dl=0

The facilitator will also need **a timer** - a phone or watch will suffice.

Okay, I want to play. What do I need to do in advance?

If you are using the pre-made sheets, download and print sufficient numbers for your activity.

For the **minimum number of players** - 15 - you would have 2 Ministry Officials, 5 Librarians, and 8 Community Members. This would require:

- 1 set Collection & Programme Cards1
- 1 set x Character sheets
- 20 x Funding application toolkit

Multiply up these proportions for larger groups; you can also adjust the mix based on your experience as a facilitator.

In larger groups, you may also consider some of the players to be "**observers and adjudicators**" who do not play in the game, but take notes for the debrief and provide rule-of-thumb resolution to any disputes.

How do I play Library Island?

Welcome your attendees to Library Island. We usually begin sessions with a real-world acknowledgement of **the traditional owners of the land** on which the session is held; the game was originally created on the land of the Turrbal and Jagera people in what is now Brisbane, Australia. As the game includes Indigenous characters (albeit from a fictional island), we consider it important to make this acknowledgment before playing.

Tell the attendees:

- *"Library Island is a small nation in the middle of the sea with three main towns: Pulpchester, Codex, and Little Folio. Each town runs its own library service, but the libraries are supervised and their funding is managed via the Ministry of Shelves - which is desperate for a name change."*

- *"The main language on Library Island is Bookish. Bookish people colonised the island two hundred years ago. The*

Indigenous peoples of Library Island speak Verbalese, but this language is not widely used, and Bookish is the language of almost all day-to-day dealings. Few Bookish people speak Verbalese, but all Verbalese people speak Bookish."

- *"The way Library Island works is this: Community Members visit the library - or maybe encounter Librarians working off-site - and they can use the library services. They do this by using pieces of paper representing programmes or loanable collection items. The Community Members can ask for whatever they like and behave how they wish within the library. The Librarians arrange, display, and loan the collection items by handing them to the Community Members."*

- *"Other pieces of paper represent programmes. These will tell you what kind of programme it is and then give the librarian an activity to perform. For example, a piece of paper representing a tech session might say, 'Make a paper aeroplane with your client.' This doesn't mean that the paper aeroplane would be the real-world tech session; making the plane represents the amount of time the librarian spends running a programme instead of doing any other work."*

- *"If you want a collection item or programme which is not currently available, you ask the librarian, or you can go to the Ministry of Shelves for funding. They may have some bureaucracy you need to go through. The Librarians may speak with the Ministry, but so may the community - either to seek funding directly or to complain, protest, advocate for changes to service."*

- *"Today we are going to visit Library Island and take on the roles of Community Members, Librarians, and Officials from the Ministry of Shelves. There are some simple rules and instructions to guide you, but the game is very open-ended, so if you haven't been told of a rule, you can make up your own*

solution as you go. Just bear in mind this is a professional development session, and bear in mind the environment around you - you still need to behave appropriately to the setting. The aim of the game is to keep the Island running for five years; we'll play one round so you get the feel of it."

Assign participants to the roles: **Ministry Officials, Librarians, Community Members**.

Ministry Officials

Take Ministry Officials to a table in one corner of the room, give them a ream of blank paper, and tell them:

- *"You have the power to fund and create new library programmes, collections, and services. You can also monitor and assess community needs and intervene if you need to. Your role is likely to be very busy - everyone will be coming to you wanting something! - so spend some time now thinking about how you will manage their demands and deal with queues of people coming to your desk, will you create an application form, how will you assess whether the money was used well, etc."*

If you are using the starter pack, give them the Funding forms and suggest this as a way of organising applications for funding.

Librarians

Take Librarians to another corner of the room and tell them:

- *"You are the librarians. You are going to have to run the services on Library Island, serve the community, and deal with the Ministry. You will need to move the tables and furniture in this space to create three libraries, one for each town, in different parts of the room. You'll need to examine your collection and programmes, divide them between the libraries, put them on display, and think about any procedure you might need for inter library loans, rotating staff, sharing collections, and so on."*

If you are using the starter pack, give them the collection and programme items. Alternatively, give them blank cards to create their own collection and programme items.

Community Members:

Take Community Members to another part of the room and tell them:

- *"You are the community of Library Island. You are free to visit any library, seek the collection items and programmes you wish, complain if they are not there, visit the Ministry, collaborate with other Community Members, advocate, agitate, or devise alternative provision. You are free to be as creative as you wish in finding ways to meet your characters' wants and needs."*

If you are using the starter pack, give them each a Character Sheet.

Alternatively, give them blank sheets and get them to create characters - simply give the character a name, assign a language group or any other markers of identity you wish, and then write down:

- One thing they want in life,
- One thing they need in life, and
- One obligation they have in life.

Tell the Community Members to circulate, see who else is in their community, see if there are natural political allies or opponents, spot and develop some relationships, so that when the library doors open, they are thinking of themselves as a community.

Thinking Time for Participants

Give the groups approximately 10 minutes to organize themselves - this should always be slightly less time than they need and it is better to "throw them in at the deep end" so they get the feeling for open-ended play and solving a problem for themselves.

Tell the participants that the library doors will be opening in two minutes and the game will run for five years. When two minutes are up, announce that the libraries are now officially open.

Gameplay

Community Members will visit the libraries, interacting with one another, **Librarians**, and the **Ministry**. Librarians and the Ministry will respond to the Community Members and proactively come up with new ways of meeting their wants and needs.

"*There was a lot of confusion at the beginning—confusion not in what we were doing but in how to go about doing it — but this is part of the game. The participants were forced to communicate with each other to make sense of the world which they were creating—what the rules were and what the problems were.*"

— Library Island Playtester

Announce each time a year comes to an end - you can slightly vary the length of the years, bearing in mind the length of time your session runs for. Approximately four minutes to six minutes per year works best - monitor the interest and energy levels of the group.

Half-time: Debrief and Reiterate

"The first person we asked about in the debrief was the Transient character. How did she feel? She said she felt shunned. Abandoned. No one wanted anything to do with her. She felt that she was treated terribly by all of the others. You could feel in the room that everyone was reflecting pretty hard on their treatment of her. She said not a single person offered to help her. Not a single person offered to provide any kind of social service or kindness."

— Library Island Playtester

Announce the end of year five and **congratulate participants**. Invite them to take a seat and discuss with the people around them, "**What happened during your time on Library Island?** What went well? What didn't go so well? What would you do differently next time?" You can also invite

the group to share these experiences more widely.

After this short debrief, invite the group to play again. In order to develop the activity, participants should remain in their assigned roles unless they were desperately unhappy, in which case invite them to swap.

If your group are writing their own collection items, programmes, and character sheets, you may give them time to **tinker** with these items before you play again.

If you are running Library Island for non-librarians, this is the point at which you should **adapt** the game to your institution. See '**Extending the Game**' below.

Repeat the session, but add a few twists:

You may invite your group to tailor the *"Island"* to reflect your organisation - for example, in a university setting, Community Members become Students and Staff, Librarians become Academic Librarians and Liaison Staff, the Ministry become the Dean's Office.

You may wish to add **complications**, such as a natural disaster (see 'Extending the Game' below).

Final Debrief and Discussion

"We asked a new migrant what his experience was like. His story blew my mind. As a new migrant who could not speak the language, he went to the Ministry. Without being able to speak the language, he acquired funding through hand motions and signals. Using the funding he went to a library, learned the language of the Verbalese people, in his accomplishment he had a Pride Parade. Then went on to get a job at a library. When he finished his story my only thought was: this is the definition of the American Dream."

— Library Island Playtester

After another five year round, debrief the players once more. This time **identify specific learnings** and invite the

participants to discuss them with reference to their real-world work:

- What happened on Library Island this time?
- What problems did you face and how did you solve them?
- What went well and why?
- What similar issues have you encountered in real life? How did you address them?
- What do you think our organisation should be doing differently?

If you chose to have a natural disaster during Library Island, additional questions might include:

- What would happen if our organisation faced a disaster like the one on the island?
- What would happen to the building?
- How were staff affected? What changed about the needs of the community?
- Where might you need to improvise and respond to changing circumstances beyond what was planned for?

Participants may hold discussions in small groups or in whole groups.

An optional conclusion which connects the activity to your institution or community and creates a tangible product from the session is **"Arrows of Time"**, see below.

Optional - Arrows of Time

To consolidate the discussion and create a product from this activity, conclude with 'Arrows of Time':

Give each team a large sheet paper and some marker pens.

Give them this instruction: "*Put the sheet of paper in landscape format, with the long sides at the top and bottom. The left-hand side of the paper represents the past and the right-hand side of the paper represents the future.*"

(**Note:** It is useful for the facilitator to demonstrate the drawing of the arrows in this activity, using a sheet of paper or whiteboard at the front of the room.)

Give them this instruction: *"On the bottom of the page, draw an arrow going from the left hand edge to the centre."*
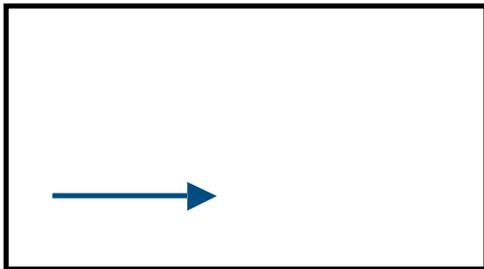
"This arrow represents issues from the past that will still be affecting us in five years' time. What historic issues will we still face? What ongoing tasks will not have been completed? What legacy issues might arise? How will the past still be catching up with us in 2023?"

Ask the teams to label this arrow with the issues they believe will still be affecting the organisation in 2023.

When all teams have labelled the first arrow, give them this instruction: *"At the top of the page, draw an arrow going from the right hand edge to the centre."*
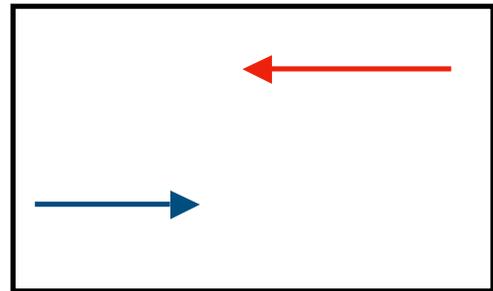
"This arrow represents the future's impact on our business. What potential new issues can we foresee? What changes in the community we serve might affect our work? What wider social, political, or technological changes might affect us? What new tasks will have become part of our business?"

Ask the teams to label this arrow with new issues they believe will start to impact the organisation by 2023.

When all teams have labelled the second arrow, give them this instruction: *"Halfway up the page, draw a final arrow going from the centre towards the right hand side."*
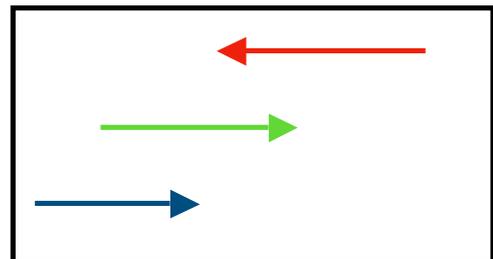
"This arrow represents what we can do in the present going forward. What choices can we make to address legacy issues and meet the impact of the future? What should the organisation do in response to those issues from the past and the future?"

Ask the teams to label this arrow with the choices and actions they believe their organisation should take to respond to the issues they have identified.

The teams may present their diagrams to one another. Keep the diagrams as documentation of their discussion.

This activity derives from the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach.

Extending the Game

Using the game for non-library institutions

After the first round, congratulate the participants for their visit to Library Island. Tell them:

"Now we are going to transform Library Island into an island representing our institution's work. There will still be three towns with a diverse community to serve, but now the institution in question will be one like ours."

"If you are a Librarian, you are now a worker in our institution. Turn over all the programme and collection cards and replace them with the products and services which our institution offers."

"If you are a Community Member, you are now a client or potential client of our institution. Turn over your piece of paper and create a new character who is the kind of person our institution might encounter. Work with your fellow Community Members to make sure you have a representative mix of characters. On the character sheet, add one thing that your character wants, one thing that your character needs, and what thing that your character finds difficult."

"If you are a Ministry Official, you need to adapt the funding forms so they represent how our organisation is funded. You will still have blank paper to distribute, but think about how that funding is allocated to our organisation, and what kind of bureaucracy will be needed to manage it."

Give the participants around twenty minutes to tailor their sheets, with plenty of time for critical discussion and revision. Then play a second round of Library Island, followed by the "Final Debrief and Discussion" above.

Adding a starter

To deepen the exploration of strategy, you can open the session with a Library Island Priorities activity, using a whiteboard and markers.

Get the participants to shout out priorities for a library service and scribe them on the board until it is full.

Now invite the participants to reduce the number of priorities to just four.

They do this by proposing to merge two priorities on the board into one new umbrella term. If anyone objects, the room debates the merger until a decision is reached or an alternative merger is proposed. Once a merger is accepted, the facilitator erases the two priorities and replaces them with the new umbrella term, and keeps doing this (merging umbrella terms as well) until there are just four priorities on the board.

These final priorities will necessarily be broad and reductive, but the process of discussion and debate will heighten awareness of positions around strategic priority in the room - when we use this activity in consultations we photograph or video the discussion to document the mergers as well as the finished product.

Adding disasters, challenges, and complications

"I went over to the Librarians and told them a typhoon had struck the library and the building has been totally flooded so they must figure out what to do next. Instinctively they all grabbed their resources and set up pop up libraries on the outskirts of the area, abandoning the tables they had originally called home."

— Library Island Playtester

Add challenges to your Library Island - announce a flood or natural disaster in year 3, close one of the libraries, destroy or damage some of the collection items, remove one of the library staff members and turn them into a homeless member of the community.

Add another language group of new migrants who speak neither Verbalese or Bookish - see the 'New Migrant' option in the starter pack for an example.

Use an interactive presentation service such as Menti - https://www.mentimeter.com/ - to serve as 'social media' for Library Island.

Tailoring the game

"I created a new character for the game that is a 6-8 year old who is lost, hungry, and has to go to the bathroom but is afraid to go by themselves. I created this character in an attempt to replace the transient character. I was hesitant to use the transient because I was fearful that participants might play the transient as if they were a drunk college student or be exploitative of the mental illness character trait. We did wind up using the transient in the 3rd round which turned out fine as well." — Library Island Playtester

Tailor Library Island to fit your local setting, but bear in mind that its fictional quality is part of its power. People are much more comfortable exploring conflict and compromise in explicitly fictional situations which do not sit too close to their real lives. Too much tailoring can stifle discussion.

However, local ways of life, language, attitudes and experiences can and should productively inform a session of Library Island. For example, when creating service priorities in a New Zealand session, the Māori term *manaakitanga* was included. This is the concept of demonstrating respect, generosity and care for others. By making such local concepts integral to the activity, community knowledge can be shared, explored, and reinforced by participants.

Props and additional resources

Once you are a confident facilitator of Library Island, the sky is the limit when it comes to resources. Add props or costumes or set dressing for your facility.