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LIBRARY ISLAND: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE LAND OF FICTION

The librarians gathered for their national conference in Bookish, the capital city of Library Island. They took coffee at registration, said hello to old friends, and took their seats in the auditorium.

A speaker from the Ministry of Shelves performed a welcome according to the protocols of the island's Indigenous peoples and greeted the gathered librarians. These symposiums for the national strategic plan took place only every five years. Millions of dollars worth of funding were at stake. For two days, the librarians wrangled and argued and made deals to secure their priorities, and their funds, for a half-decade to come. Eventually they managed to boil down all their needs, dreams, and desires to four key areas through which the Ministry would provide funding.

(The long-held dream of renaming the Ministry of Shelves to something better suiting 21st century librarianship was once again left to a future gathering).

The meeting came to an end. There was a conference dinner, with wine and wild dancing, and finally the librarians said their farewells. They went back to their cities, towns, and villages across Library Island, and prepared for whatever the future might hold.

What is the professional benefit of play? When is it better to impose a learning objective, and

when should we learn through experimentation and happy accident? How can we "fail better" without wasting valuable resources?

Teams across the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) have been exploring these questions for over a year now. As Creative-in-Residence since January 2016, I've held the remit to work across departments challenging the status quo, exploring new programs and partnerships, and encouraging innovation across the board.

In large part, we've achieved this by careful listening. This kind of institutional innovation is less about inflicting an idea on an organisation, more about identifying opportunities that align with both official strategic priorities and the needs or wants that we see on the front line.

Through this approach, we've managed to expand the uptake of Queensland Fun Palaces from single figures in 2015 to more than 50 communities last year, and managed to promote innovations such as the FunFace lab which transposes people's selfies into images from our heritage collection. Activities like our Presenterless Workshops allow librarians and their allies across our state to take charge of their own learning, destabilising the traditional roles of expert and student.

Still we wanted to go further, to create radical opportunities for everyone to listen to others;



to understand, explore, challenge, support, and promote fresh ideas from across our community

In the early weeks of 2017, we made our first incursion into the land of fiction. Breaking down the walls of dream and reality using nothing more than a whiteboard and a few dozen sheets of paper, we managed to strike up a conversation with our alternate, fictional selves, over on Library Island.

Library Island is a simple simulation of librarianship at the national level. In an open-ended, rules-light roleplay, players take on the persona of a librarian, a community representative, or an official from the 'Ministry of Shelves' which funds and audits the library service nationally.

Simple activities represent loans and library programming; there are opportunities for communities and libraries alike to apply for funding, co-design services, and even for the Ministry to intervene in times of crisis. Over the course of a couple of hours, representing five years in the life of a fictional postcolonial nation, players get to take on a new role and see librarianship from a fresh perspective. Each player, by taking part in the game, sees the challenges and opportunities inherent in a range of roles. Because this is a game, players can be more daring or controversial than they might be in a real world setting. And the roleplay element introduces elements of office politics and conflict which are sometimes forgotten in similar activities like design thinking. Playing Library

Island also encourages people to challenge their own preconceptions when asked to take on fictional roles which may not match their own beliefs and values.

Initial tests for Library Island took place in the Cultural Precinct of Queensland's state capital Brisbane. Even these early sessions, bringing in professionals from other GLAM sectors, proved revealing. Museum professionals, for example, were shocked to realise how responsive to community demands libraries were expected to be, and how open library collections were compared to those held by museums. Some players cast in the role of an Indigenous Library Islander were challenged to realise that even well-meaning organisations might fail to deliver on promises to improve their lot and bring about social justice. And later on, when staff from Queensland's Indigenous Knowledge Centres joined a game of Library Island, there was gleeful satire as they took on the roles of conservative community members whose values were antithetical to their own.

Library Island has since rolled out to regional settings, allowing library workers to explore professional issues at the national level within the safe space of a roleplaying game.

Why is this valuable? Because such freedom - learning through opportunity rather than predetermined objectives - generates the kind of innovative ideas which are prized in a profession going through radical change.



For example, in the 'national conference' which opens Library Island, players are challenged to determine four broad national objectives for the next five years. One player – Jacinta Sutton, normally a project officer at the State Library - proposed a "compass" whose four points reflected objectives facing inward to our staff, outward to the public, backwards to the preservation of heritage, or forwards to the digital future.

The idea was inspired by a talk on Indigenous architecture she'd heard at SLQ's Asia Pacific Design Library. Ordinarily, it might have remained a stray thought without space for articulation or development, but on Library Island it became a serious contender for a vision of the future.

After the game was over, our interdepartmental communications task force at the State Library explored the compass as a way of articulating our values both internally and externally. Another staff member was able to draw on experience of using similar approaches communicating corporate values in the private sector.

Bringing together these experiences and the will to deliver, the compass became a reality - a project we will be testing across SLQ over the coming year.

Meanwhile, cut-down versions of the Library Island program, simulating grant applications or the use of State Library's WELCOME Toolkit for program development, have also been made available for library workers across Queensland to run their own innovation sessions.

Part of my team's job is always to go one step beyond, to be the scouts and pathfinders

for busy libraries across a state three times the size of France. As techniques like design thinking become commonplace, and innovation a managerial buzzword, where do we go next in search of the new? What is the best way to encourage all staff, plus our peers, partners, and other stakeholders, to feel confident in putting forward their brightest ideas?

Could it be that our next job is to break down the walls between fact and fiction? Could open-ended play be as valuable for staff as for children in the community, and could it be physical and low-tech as well as digital?

Dare you step across the veil of reality and set foot on Library Island? What treasures will you find there to bring back to our world?

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He will be running *Library Island* at the 2017 LIANZA Conference

Currently Creative-in-Residence at the State Library of Queensland and Creative/Researcher at British Library Labs, Matt has devised everything from a season of burlesque in New Zealand's biggest city to live zombie battles in rural Australia. He has spoken in the British & Australian Parliaments and is a regular keynote speaker at national and state events.

You can read Matt's newsletter at tinyletter.com/marvellouselectrical