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Taking OPACs to the Limit

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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Taking OPACs to the Limit

Online catalogs are dynamic and always open to improvements

Not so long ago—last April to be exact—I thought my library's online catalog, QCAT, was as good as an OPAC could be. We even went so far as to print up 200 mouse pads with the image of the OPAC's front screen. I was constantly fine-tuning, but as far as I was concerned, QCAT was complete. Then, a number of things happened to shake me out of my stupor.

First, I went to a conference and saw a presentation by someone who had done remarkable things with an OPAC. After that, our OPAC's software was enhanced to allow for a whole suite of personalized applications for our key users. In addition, the reopening of Quinnipiac's vastly remodeled library forced us to create new ways of describing the building's layout. Finally, in rewriting the help screens, I hit upon a way of handling new book lists that has already started saving people a lot of work and has implications far beyond our library. As the late Mr. Sinatra would put it, "It was a very good year."

A Gathering of Innovators

Each spring, the libraries that run Innovative Interfaces' online catalog hold the 3-day Innovative Users Group Annual Conference. Last year it was in Philadelphia. Even though this was my fifth such conference, it was the first one in which I was simply an attendee and didn't have to speak or help run the show. My only obligation was to attend sessions and come back with some good ideas.

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While getting my name tag, I came across Karen Peirone, the incoming president of the Innovative Users Group. She mentioned that her library, the Rodman Public Library in Alliance, Ohio, was using OPAC links fields to add book reviews to the standard bibliographic records. That way, a patron finding a record in the catalog can not only see if the book is checked out, but can also see what reviewers said about the title. This is exactly the kind of

idea I look for at a conference, and my library was able to make good use of it.

One of the most inspiring sessions was presented by Kevin Cullen, a systems librarian from Colorado State University who spoke about OPAC Web design. He convinced me to abandon the idea of using text that looks like graphics and instead incorporate actual graphics that would allow me to add "alt" messages that describe a search. (You'd be surprised at the number of people who think that an "author" search finds books "about" an author.) He said that by adding these graphics to secondary screens, you allow the users to change search modes without going back to the main menu—and make use of the efficiency of browser cache files for a fast screen load.

As Cullen talked about the importance of contrast, I felt a dagger slipping into my heart. Some of our screens displayed dark blue letters on a light blue background. He also talked about the thought that goes into search examples. If a search within your library's OPAC displays the title "Letters of Millard Fillmore," you had better make sure that such a book is in your catalog, because people will want to use the examples you give.

I left Philadelphia with a treasure-trove of ideas and a commitment to give QCAT a complete facelift.

The Design Process

The redesign of QCAT got underway in the last month of the spring semester. For political reasons, we designed buttons for Author, Title, and Subject searches that included the school colors. The face of the original QCAT main menu screen had been royal purple, but I finally had to give that up and chose a light beige for good contrast. The biggest changes were in the secondary screens where the actual searches were made.

At least once a day, I would go to the reference area and show off the work in progress. One day, somebody walked in when the Author search was up on the screen and said: "Ooh, that's neat. What is that?" I knew I was getting there. Because people can make instant skips between author, title, subject, and keyword screens, I found that I had to work hard to make the screens identical. The other librarians warned me to wait until the last day of classes before I made any real-world changes to the catalog. I followed their advice and introduced the new QCAT after the semester ended.

Beyond a New Look

Another thing that stuck in my mind from the conference was the idea of linking from bibliographic records to book reviews. At a public library, this would mainly be used for current popular items, but at Quinnipiac University, I could envision using this for scholarly material. One of our most frequently asked questions

from students is, "Do you have a review of this book?" If the OPAC could automatically answer this question, our library would be a happier place. To that end, I made a list of every book the library owned about the Civil War, as well as every biography. A student assistant of mine patiently checked every title to see if a review could be found in JSTOR. Since we have a lifetime commitment to JSTOR, its reviews seemed like a stable source of information.

Surprisingly, nearly half of the titles in history and biography netted reviews in JSTOR. I taught my assistant to go in and add the links, and since then, our supply of bibliographic records with links has shot into the thousands. Because we still haven't looked up reviews in sociology and philosophy, my assistant is assured that she'll have enough work to last through her college years.

While these enhancements were going on at Quinnipiac, other possibilities were appearing thanks to improvements in Innovative Interfaces' INNOPAC software. In particular, Innovative's My Millennium product allows libraries with WebPACs to provide a space for students and faculty to log in with their names and bar code numbers. Once the system has recognized these users, they can look at their personal circulation records, suggest new titles without further verification, and access an enhanced search screen. We have inaugurated special screens for students and faculty, and we are evaluating the early results to see what other features we can offer to our primary users.

Another relatively new feature in Innovative's INNOPAC is the ability to set up help screens for item locations. A user who searches for "The Grapes of Wrath" will see that there's a copy of the novel in the circulating stack area. Since the remodeled library opened just a few months ago, students will probably ask where that is. Now, when they click on the item, they get a screen that provides a photograph of the area, a map, and verbal directions to its location.

What's New?

Probably the best idea in this wave of production came about simply by accident. When I was rewriting the screens that explain how to search QCAT, I used the example of Physical Therapy, one of Quinnipiac's major programs. I realized that I could go beyond telling users how to search this subject, limit the search to books published in the last few years, and sort the results so that the newest books display first. I could perform that search, save the URL, and make it linkable. Once I did that, I realized that I could do the same thing for any subject. After that was done, our system would have a "dynamic" list of books. That means that if the cataloging department adds 10 new books of American history, they automatically get added to the list the next time somebody conducts a search.

The dynamic list has been a very popular feature of QCAT, and as of last fall, other INNOPAC libraries were starting to notice and talk about it on the Innovative Interfaces, Inc.) listserv. However, this idea doesn't stop with INNOPAC libraries. A number of other library systems vendors are set up so that the same procedures will work on their systems. I confirmed that I could also access a dynamic list at New York University's Bobst Library (which uses Geac Computer Corp.'s products), and Phoenix Public Library's WebPAC (which uses CARL Corp.'s). It seems that WebPACs come in two major flavors. With

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the first, you make a search and check the resulting URL at the top of the screen. If it includes a CGI (common gateway interface) location, that means the information about that search will be lost if you try and replicate it later. The other type describes the entire operation in the URL and can be reproduced at any time.

You don't even have to wait for your library to add a feature like this. You can do it yourself by searching a subject, limiting the results list to display the newest items, and saving the resulting set in a bookmark file. This even helped me in a social situation when a friend tried to find out what new audiobooks were available in the Brooklyn Public Library. The librarian there told her she couldn't do such a search. I went into the catalog, searched the subject "audiobooks," limited the list to the year 2000, and e-mailed her the resulting URL.

More than ever, the sign on my office door should read "Department of Electronic Possibilities."

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