Inspiration Report

From Catalog to Experience:

A Participatory Discovery Platform

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Executive Summary

Libraries have provided patrons with access to collections through catalogs, websites, and physical shelving. While these systems are effective for locating known material, they are less effective at encouraging serendipity and helping people find something they didn't know they wanted. Museums have increasingly experimented with new technologies that transform their collection from static objects into interactive experiences. The Cleveland Museum of Art's ArtLens Wall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's experiments with Bluetooth beacons, and the San Diego Museum of Art's mobile application demonstrate how digital tools can better connect visitors with collections, gallery spaces, and the stories connected with each object.

This report aims to explore how these approaches can be adapted to a library setting through a location-aware, interactive, and participatory collection discovery service. Rather than acting as a replacement for the library catalog, the service would create another layer of collection discovery. Patrons could encounter recommendations based on where they are in the library, explore themed collections, save favorites, and contribute reviews or recommendations of materials they have used.

This service will help make the library collection more visible, social, and dynamic while providing patrons a greater role in shaping how collections are experienced. A phased implementation with mobile-friendly location pages could allow the library to test the concept before further investing in the location-aware technology.

Introduction

The library catalog is one of the most important technologies in a library, but is primarily designed around a specific kind of information-seeking behavior: finding something that is already known or specifically requested. A patron searches for a title, author, or subject and is given a list of relevant materials. This discovery model is useful, but it doesn't necessarily encourage exploration of other materials.

In an information environment shaped by social media algorithms, streaming platforms, and personalized digital services, libraries need to compete for patrons' attention, especially when a patron doesn't know what they want. People increasingly encounter information through platforms that anticipate interests, make recommendations, and encourage exploration. Libraries can learn from these environments and adapt services that provide similar experiences for their own collections.

Museums provide an especially useful source for inspiration. Institutions like the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), and the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA) have experimented with interactive displays, location-aware technology, mobile applications, and user participation. These projects demonstrate technologies that can turn a physical collection into an experience rather than a static repository.

This report explores these ideas and how the library can adapt these ideas into a community-focused collection discovery experience. The proposed service would combine location-aware information, visual discovery, and patron participation to help users discover materials in ways that complement the traditional library catalog.

Context and Relevance

Libraries already contain many of the elements for this type of experience. Libraries have:

- A physical collection
- A digital catalog
- Organized spaces
- Subject and genre groupings
- Staff recommendations
- Community members and knowledge
- Programs and events

- Digital resources
- Opportunities for community participation

What is often missing is something that connects all of these elements. A patron in the fiction section may be surrounded by thousands of possible discoveries, but the physical arrangement of the collection doesn't communicate anything about why one book may be of interest to them. A catalog can provide bibliographic information, but it doesn't necessarily tell the patron if others in the community loved the book or if community members also recommend similar authors. A participatory collection discovery service could create that additional layer.

Fig. 1 The Traditional Model

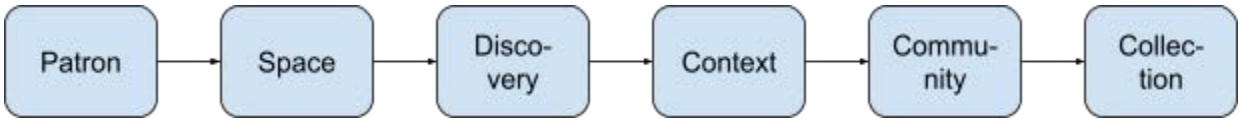

Fig. 2 The Proposed Model

This approach reflects the idea of a participatory library and emphasizes information and library service. The patron is both a recipient of services and a contributor to the library experience.

Impact and Application

The service to be implemented can be called LibraryLens, a mobile and interactive platform that will help patrons discover library materials through location, curation, and community recommendations. Patrons entering the library could choose to interact with the system through a mobile device or catalog computer.

The platform can present materials based on curated views, location, or theme. For example, if you're in the History section, you can explore new arrivals, local history books, or community recommendations. This adapts the CMA's ArtLens Wall elements of visual and thematic discoveries in a library environment (*Artlens Wall*, n.d.).

Additional context can be applied in the discovery process through associated supplemental materials and connect a patron with an experience they would not have if they were just browsing

the physical shelf. Some examples of supplemental materials that could be linked to library materials are:

- Staff recommendation videos
- Similar titles
- Library programs

Patrons can also contribute their own knowledge to the platform. After checking out a book, a patron can choose to:

- Rate the material
- Write a short review
- Created a themed list with other materials
- Recommend related materials

The library can manage the metadata and collection development side of materials, while patrons contribute a social layer to that information.

Evidence and Examples

Cleveland Museum of Art

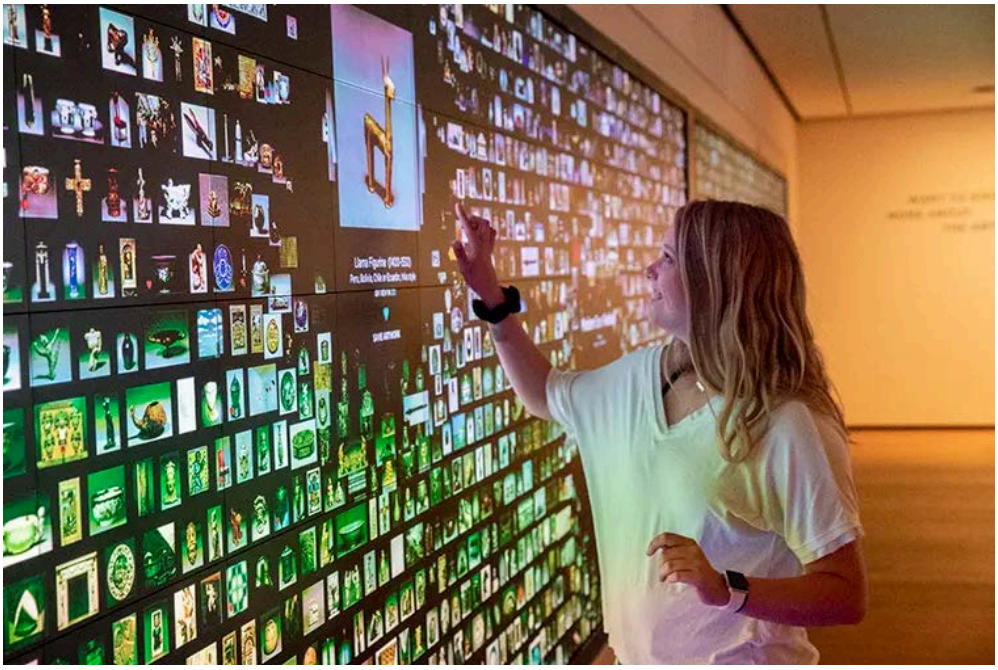

Fig. 3 A visitor interacts with the ArtLens wall (*Artlens Wall*, n.d.).

CMA's ArtLens Wall shows how digital technology can make an entire collection more accessible and discoverable. The large interactive interface allows visitors to explore artworks beyond

what they can see on view in the galleries. Works are shown by themes, types, time period, and curated views. The most significant lesson for libraries is that a library's collection can be explored and displayed through multiple pathways. Instead of expecting patrons to know the correct search terms, the library can increase the number of entry points for patron search discovery.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

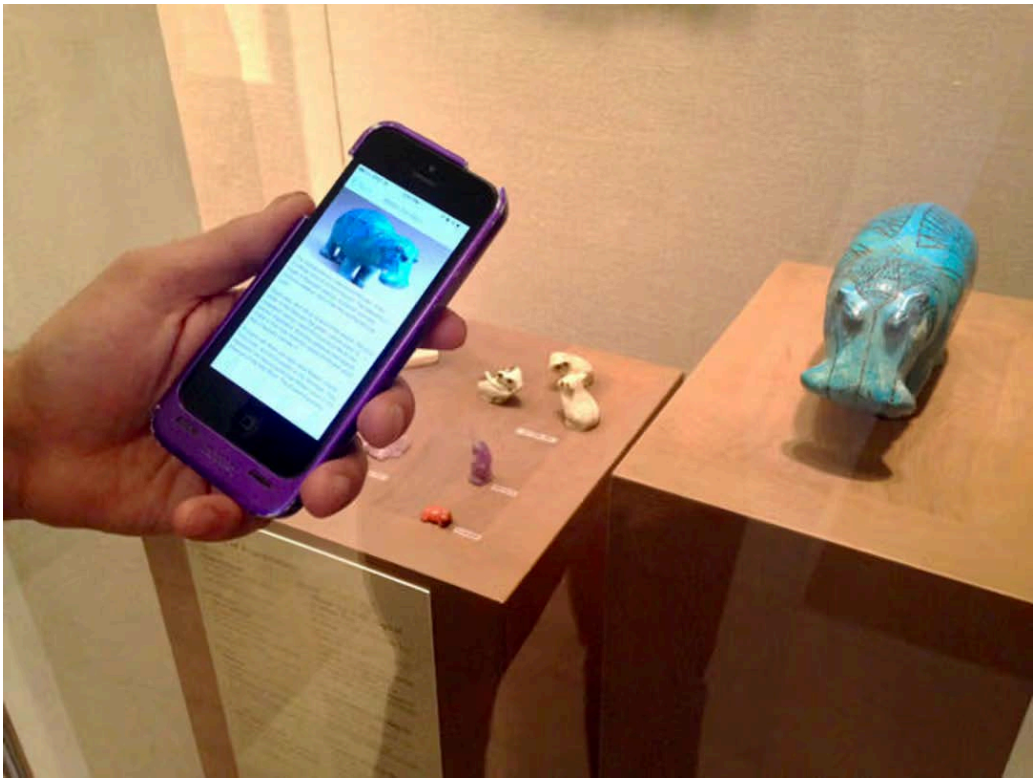

Fig. 4 A user exploring beacon technology (Doljenkova & Tung, 2015)

The Met's beacon project demonstrates the potential of location-aware experiences inside cultural institutions. Bluetooth beacons can communicate the location of a device within a defined physical space. For a library, this creates an opportunity to make the space itself part of discovery.

A patron in the children's area could receive children's programming information. A patron near local history could discover oral histories and historical photographs. A patron near the makerspace might encounter upcoming workshops.

San Diego Museum of Art

SDMA has a mobile app that shows how multiple forms of digital engagement can work together. Each page for an artwork has included curator-led videos, custom audio tours, location-specific content, visitor favorites, recommendations, maps, and augmented reality. The main takeaway for the library is that technology does not have to serve a single function; it can create a continuous relationship between the collection, the library, and the patron.

Strategy for Implementation

A library does not need to build an elaborate system immediately. A phased approach could allow staff to test the concept, collect feedback, and determine whether additional investment is justified. The following phases make incremental progress towards full execution of the idea.

Phase 1: Mobile Friendly Webpages

- QR codes will take patrons to a webpage according to their location
- The webpage can include the aforementioned supplemental materials
- Low cost way to implement and test the concept

Phase 2: Add Community Participation

- Introduce patron recommendations and reviews.
- Create and enact participation guidelines
- Develop Moderation procedures and guidelines
- Establish privacy policies
- Collet participation data and qualitative feedback from users

Phase 3: Connect Stories to Collections

- Add short audio, video, or written materials related to library materials
- Sources can include library staff, community members, etc.
- This supplemental material will further expand the utility of the platform

Phase 4: Explore Location-Aware Technology

- If the previous phases were successful and received positive feedback, the library can experiment with Bluetooth beacons or other location based technology

- Identify installation locations for beacons
- Launch pilot in one area of the library and evaluate before full implementation

Success of the platform should not be measured only by page visits or circulation data. Qualitative patron feedback will be crucial to determine what features or inputs are desired by the community, as well as see what parts of the platform need further improvements (Bienkowski, 2016). Overall, the goal of the platform should be to determine if it helps patrons form stronger connections with the library collection.

Conclusion

The future of library technology doesn't necessarily mean replacing familiar services with increasingly complex systems. Innovations like LibraryLens can create additional ways for people to experience the library.

The museum examples that inspired this report show a shift from collection access to collection experience. CMA's ArtLens Wall displayed visual and thematic discovery. The Met's beacon project demonstrated the potential of location-aware services. SDMA show how mobile technology can combine location, storytelling, recommendations, and visitor participation. Libraries can adapt these lessons while maintaining their own values of information access, intellectual freedom, and community engagement.

A location-aware, participatory collection discovery service would not fully replace the catalog. LibraryLens is an opportunity for the library to rethink how the collection is presented and experienced. When physical spaces, digital tools, professional knowledge, and community participation work together, the library collection can become an environment for curiosity.

The most important innovation is not the beacon, mobile application, or interactive display itself. It is the general shift toward designing library services around **discovery, connection, and participation**. The technology simply creates new pathways for community discovery, connection, and participation to happen.

References

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