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A Virtual Library World for Pre-entry University Students

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Abstract

The University of Portsmouth's pre-entry project, PrepUp, contains a Library section which endeavours to use simple graphics and a virtual world metaphor to acculturate students to the University Library before they begin their course. Using graphical elements it contains informative items and fun features to encourage exploration and discovery. Usage and feedback suggest that this is a useful addition to the project which engages students and assists them in getting to grips with their early days at University.

1. Introduction

Adjustment to University life can be a big step for many students whether they come from college or school, or are mature students returning to education. The University of Portsmouth's PrepUp project aims to provide an introductory experience to such students before they even arrive on campus. The University's Department of Curriculum Quality and Enhancement (DCQE) has been instrumental in setting up this project and involving faculties and support services.

"The website comprises a range of features including: skills development activities, videos of lecturers and students talking about the course and learning experience, and an animated mock-up 'lecture theatre' that deals with frequently asked questions and social networking groups, enabling you to interact with other prospective students of your chosen course." [1] Technically, the PrepUP website is stored on a unix server, however it is portable to any platform including CD.

After an initial trial with the Portsmouth Business School, the project was extended to

include one department from each faculty within the university and it was at this point that the University Library was invited to participate in the project and provide a library portion of the PrepUp website. Many schools and colleges have fairly small libraries so anything we could do to assist in acculturating students to a much larger and more complex facility would be useful. The author has written previously on alleviating library anxiety [2] and this is a precursor to the types of induction discussed there.

From the outset we felt that whatever else we contributed it should be both informative and have some element of fun as well. We did not want to simply replicate the Library homepage [3] with its huge wealth of information in a traditional structure. Attendance at the University's annual Learning & Teaching Conference, which in 2007 was titled 'Engaging, Entertaining & Educating: Promoting Student Learning' also provided much inspiration for thinking there might well be ways of developing something more engaging for students. One presentation in particular [4] demonstrated that students are willing to go to great lengths to explore and get involved if their imagination is engaged. The University of Salford's 'Curious?' game also fed into this process. [5] This showed that interesting design, together with compulsive game play, would be a big draw.

It was soon realized that the skills and technical abilities of Library staff would be insufficient to go too far down the design route ourselves, but DCQE were offering to provide the design and technical expertise if we provided the ideas and content. A small team from the Library worked together to produce a graphical representation of what we were imagining using PowerPoint with the understanding that this was simply a mock-up of what would eventually be constructed using

Flash. Two images from this PowerPoint file are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 and demonstrate the desire from the outset that the Library contribution would be graphically rich. Figure 2 shows something of our thinking on how we might develop a very simple ‘book’ type help with turning pages which didn’t eventually make the final project.

Figure 1: Prototype PowerPoint slide

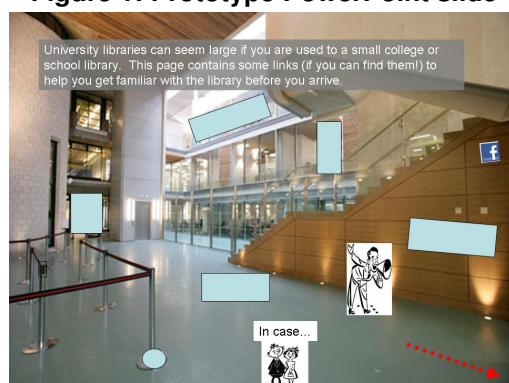
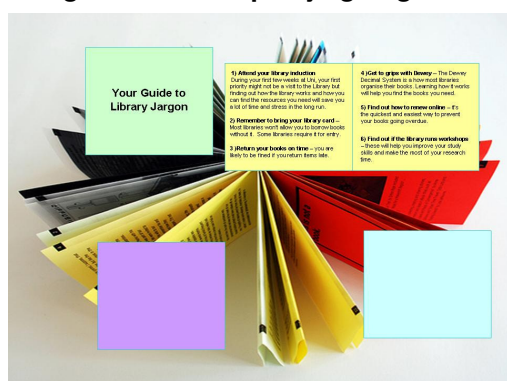


Figure 2: Mock up of jargon guide



Building on work done with ‘The Alternative Library’ at a previous university [6], it was felt that a graphical approach would be much more appealing than pure text. Internet technology has moved on in the intervening years and it is much more likely that prospective students would have access to PCs that would easily be able to handle the technical requirements of the graphics. Although NETBAGs (1980s text based adventure games) might have a certain retro appeal, we decided that a brand new extension to the University Library [7] would provide visual interest and excellence that would prove attractive to students as well as beginning the task of acclimatizing them to the Library building from the outset.

Content for the Library section might offer basic information, ‘what we offer’ and ‘how we can help’ and contain some short guides which could include what to study over the

summer break, an audio/virtual tour or even a quiz or trail through the library website. Some of these ideas were implemented, some may yet come to fruition, but one very early thought was that this might be much more like a virtual world than simply a suite of web pages. Roo Reynolds, then a ‘Metaverse Evangelist’ at IBM and now the Portfolio Executive for Social Media at BBC Vision, provided much inspiration in his excellent presentation on ‘How big business learned to love virtual worlds’ [8]. His encouragement to see virtual worlds as an immersive experience that far transcended the apparent limits of a ‘video game’ was instrumental in making us want to provide something for students that engaged them more deeply.

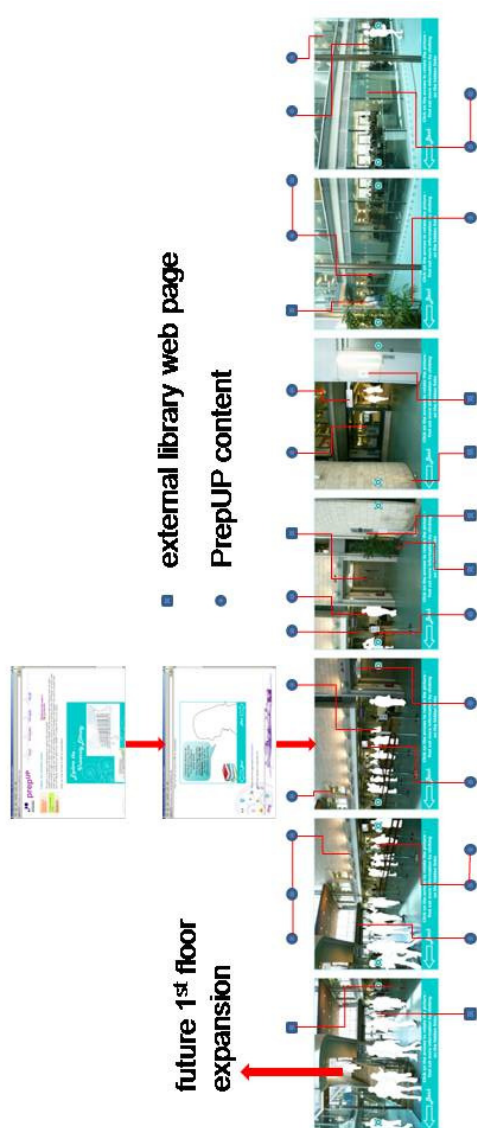
As an aside, it is worth noting at this point that the Library was exploring various Web 2.0 type social networking technologies in an effort to interact with students in a more interesting way than our traditional website. For some time we had been investing in a presence at the biannual Freshers’ Fayres in an effort to present the Library in an engaging way. For example a pirate themed ‘hidden treasure in the library’, a Dr Who themed ‘bigger on the inside than it looks’ and a Cluedo boardgame themed body in the library trail that incidentally taught information literacy skills. That in turn had led to the development of a Facebook page for the Library (with some 400 students signing up as ‘fans’ at the time of writing) as well as a blog (<http://reden.wordpress.com/>) that daily presents a ‘Thing of the Day’ – something weird or bizarre or interesting from around the internet that might or might not have an informational theme.

2. The Library in PrepUp

The virtual library presence is built with Adobe Flash software CS4 using the latest Action Script programming language, Action Script 3. It is dynamically loaded onto the page using Javascript. By researching the version penetration of Adobe Flash Player we decided to use an older player, Flash Player 9. In mature markets worldwide, including the UK, 98.8% of users use Flash Player 9. [9] We have also provided users that have Flash Player 8 or older, a link to a free Flash Player 9 upgrade on the PrepUP website for accessibility issues.

Figure 3 shows a schematic diagram of how the Library portion of PrepUp is arranged. Note that all the images are framed in the same way as the two introductory screens (shown here at the top).

Figure 3: Schematic of project

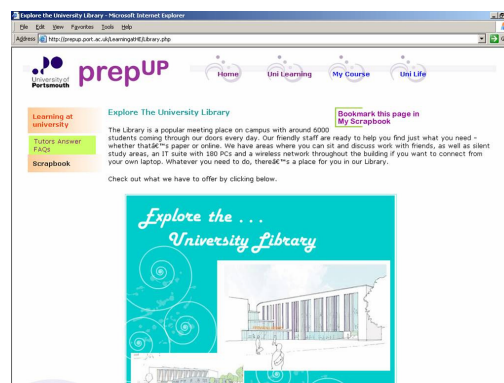


A welcome screen begins with the following text above two images of the Library taken from architectural conceptions:

“The Library is a popular meeting place on campus with around 6000 students coming

through our doors every day. Our friendly staff are ready to help you find just what you need - whether that’s on paper or online. We have areas where you can sit and discuss work with friends, as well as silent study areas, an IT suite with 180 PCs and a wireless network throughout the building if you want to connect from your own laptop. Whatever you need to do, there’s a place for you in your Library.

Check out what we have to offer by clicking below.” (See Figure 4).



This welcome text remains visible above all of the Library’s PrepUP content.

Figure 4: Library welcome page

From there a second introductory screen invites users to explore the subsequent pages and attempt to locate the links which are hidden within the images. Next users enter a sequence of actual photographs of the Library’s atrium. These seven photographs provide a near 360° panorama of the space and each picture contains from three to six ‘hidden’ links. All told there are 26 such links, eight of which link to external pages on the main Library website, the remainder being content designed specifically for PrepUP. In fact, although the links are not immediately visible, passing the mouse over the portion of the image which contains the link turns that part of the image purple (the university’s corporate colour). Some are harder to find than others. Also immediately noticeable is the fact that the people in the photographs have been blanked out. This avoids issues with privacy but also avoids the ‘ghost library’ syndrome of empty photographs. In addition it invites students to place themselves within the space to ‘fill in the blank’ as it were.

Figure 5: Example of view with links



Figure 5 shows an enlargement of one of the screens with the links highlighted and screenshots of where the links lead, (in this case one external site and two internal pages.) You can also see more clearly in the framing portion of the screen the diagram of the university at the foot of the page which is a clickable map to other sections of PrepUp.

Once a link has been found, it will either lead to an external web page or a self-contained nugget within PrepUp. External pages open in another window to facilitate returning to the PrepUp space and to make it clear that you've left the project space. Internal nuggets vary from the briefest of introductions to the Library Catalogue or referencing (with further links to the relevant external pages), or portions of the project that were designed specifically for the purpose – such as the guide to Library jargon (see Figure 6), the 10 top tips for getting the most out of your Library (see Figure 7), or the helicopter

Figure 6: First page of jargon guide



Figure 7: First page of top tips

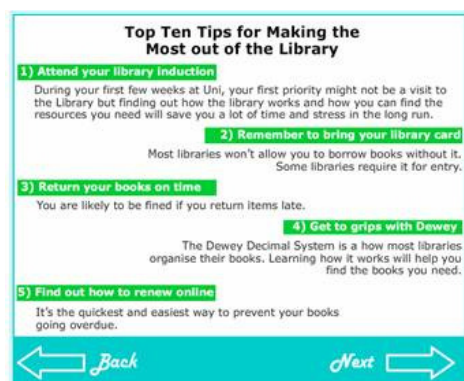
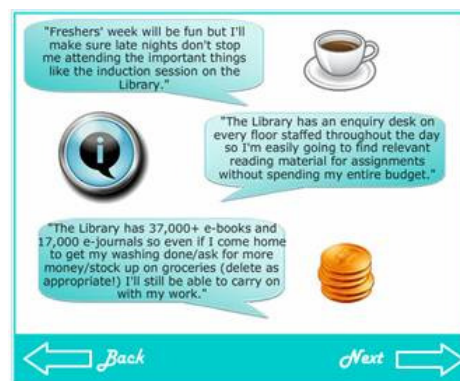


Figure 8: Third page of quotes



parenting section which provides lines to drop into conversation should students' elders need reassurance (see Figure 8). Many of the links provide information as one would expect, but some of the links are purely there to provide a sense of fun and hopefully drive a desire to explore further. For a further explanation of the rationale behind this 'easter egg' type of approach see [6]. The links to Thing of the Day (see Figure 9), or the description of Freshers' Fayre activities fall into this category.

Figure 9: Thing of the Day

3. Usage and Feedback



In the period June 2008-October 2008 some 371 people have registered with the PrepUp site and there have been 3722 hits on the index page. Table 1 shows the number of visits per person.

Table 1: Visits per person to the PrepUp site

1 - 2	3 - 5	6 - 10	11+
214	85	51	15

Within that, there have been 542 hits on the Library portion of the site. At this point it should be remembered that the PrepUp project was limited to just a handful of departments and only now, as Phase III gets under way, is it being rolled out across the University. For comparison there were over 2000 hits on the 'my course' section of PrepUp, 805 hits on the 'Life' section, 275 hits on the link to the Facebook information which provided groups for students to join and meet with each prior to their arrival, 236 hits on a virtual tour of a lecture, and 111 on a numeracy skills section.

Comments from a survey of students are shown in Table 2. Here you can see that of the 63 responses, 60 found at least some of the Library section useful and the majority felt that 'most of it' was useful.

Table 2: Student Feedback, n=63

	No use at all	Very limited use	Some of it useful	Most of it useful	All of it useful
Tutors answer FAQs	0	1	17	39	6
Academic Skills material	0	1	19	33	10
Numeracy Info	1	4	27	25	6
Exploring the Library	0	3	14	39	7

4. Future

Plans for the Library portion of Phase III of PrepUp are already well underway. The 'extension' to the virtual space will take advantage of the physical extension's upper floors. It will be possible to climb the stairs to the first floor for example (just visible in the image to the far left of Figure 3) and find help aimed at students ready to move on to the next phase of their learning. Here there will be links to the Library's growing portfolio of Information Literacy tools such as 'Referencing@Portsmouth' [10] and those collected under the banner of 'FindIT@Portsmouth' [11], there will also be pictures and audio introductions from each of

the Faculty Librarians and their assistants. Still up for discussion at present is whether we put this section behind a very short simple password and expect users to collect the letters of the password by exploring the ground floor before ascending the stairs to the second floor. This would increase the game element of the space at the risk of 'hiding' useful material. In addition, in a 'cupboard under the stairs' we plan on presenting the core of a workshop that is run by the Library on the 'Dark side of the web' warning students about the potential pitfalls and problems of social networking spaces and their privacy. Finally, the growing internationalization of Higher Education in the UK suggests possibilities for a small 'international' section with, perhaps a virtual version of the Library's multilingual 'welcome banner', orientation to British ways of working, or some simple leaflets translated into a variety of languages. The International Reflections of Leeds Met University (<http://www.lmu.ac.uk/internat/reflects/index.htm>) often spark ideas in this respect.

Other plans for the future include consideration of how much more we'd want to add to the space. At present it is only a miniature virtual world but obviously there is room for this to grow. It might be feasible, for example, to allow students to use an avatar to explore and to meet with and chat with other students replicating the Library's social space provision. Jacobs [12] looks at the relationship between social networking and integration into university life, reminding us that "in the last five years modes of communication have changed beyond all recognition". We think this will continue. In addition, it would be useful to survey students in detail about their perception of the Library's contribution to the project specifically and how they would like to see the space develop. It would also be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies of students introduced to the University via PrepUp and look at their final results, usage of the Library, satisfaction levels and other quantitative and qualitative measurements and to compare this with students who weren't acculturated in this way. As the PrepUp project matures, this kind of research should become possible and invaluable.

P.D. James, the crime writer, said on opening the physical extension in 2007: "For me the library is at the heart of any institution of learning, and particularly a university. Here we have assembled the wisdom of the past, the achievements of the present and our aspirations for the future." [13]. We see no reason why virtual Library space shouldn't be at the heart of the virtual University.

Although the whole PrepUp project is still in its infancy, the Library is firmly committed to providing a presence which we believe will help students become familiar with both the building and our facilities as well as assisting them on their path to information literacy. If some of this acculturation can take place before students even arrive on campus it can surely only enhance their experience and stand them in good stead for their years at University.

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