Less Like a Lesson, and More Like an Adventure

Learning, Libraries, and the Zombie Apocalypse

Matt Finch, Guest Columnist

Matt Finch *is a Writer and Community Outreach Consultant, www.matthewfinch.me/about.*

*Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Eric Phetteplace**, Emerging Technologies Librarian, Chesapeake College, 1000 College Circle, Wye Mills, MD 26179; email: ephetteplace@chesapeake.edu.*

When I put out a call on Twitter for ideas for the *Accidental Technologist*, I didn't expect to get anything quite as bold as this. Matt Finch (@booksadventures on Twitter) mentioned his use of zombies and Angry Birds in literacy programs, which sounded like a great fit for the column. But the piece before you is more than another exploratory piece on games in libraries. It meditates seriously on the way we engage our communities and use technology. It provides great examples as well as food for thought, all in a style far more enjoyable than my own, so without further ado . . . —*Editor*

It's high noon in Tullamore, a tiny Australian farming town.

The streets are deserted. The only sign of life comes from the public library, a cramped adjunct to the community hall.

There, thirty-two students are clustered around what appears to be a crime scene.

Bloody handprints cover the walls. Bookshelves have been knocked to the ground in some desperate struggle.

Despite the ominous silence, the kids suspect their teachers are playing a prank on them. They were brought from school to the library for a writing workshop—so is this "crime scene" the beginning of a murder mystery game?

The question is on their lips when a low moan comes from the street outside.

Lurching through the summer heat toward the library are dark figures dressed in rags, their faces cracked and deformed. These are the walking dead.

Zombies attack!

There are screams as the teachers hurry students inside and barricade the doors.

Only the library can save them now . . .

They haunt our cinemas and television sets. We dress as them, dream of them, and battle them on our videogame screens. But what can librarians and accidental technologists learn from the age of the zombie?

In November 2012, as part of a day-long storytelling event for students of Tullamore Central School, a group of 32 children aged from 8 to 18 years were besieged in the town library by local volunteers dressed as zombies.

Students had to research survival techniques using a range of fictional and non-fictional texts, then prepare a list of survival resources and map out an escape route from their town.

They were supported by local firefighters, who delivered lunch in the form of "emergency rations," and guided the children to a 'safe zone' at the end of the day.

Two reporters from the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation (ABC) were also in attendance, covering the event for local radio and supervising teen bloggers writing for the ABC Open community scheme.

During the zombie event, three Parkes Shire services came together to address their own individual goals: the library, fire service, and department of education. The library raised its profile in Tullamore and demonstrated its relevance to the community by offering an immersive literacy activity; firefighters engaged the community with an awareness of the need to prepare for natural disasters; and the local school followed the event with a week of rich learning activities based on the dramatic one-day experience.

Beyond the thrill of a playful encounter with looming monsters, the zombie siege of Tullamore offers an example of creative outreach and engagement by a rural library service, working with a range of community partners and blending traditional activities with contemporary social media.

MARKETING AND OUTREACH: THE LESSON OF PARKES SHIRE

Tullamore is located within Parkes Shire in rural New South Wales. The county is not a renowned literary centre. Its main industry is mining, and its greatest claim to fame lies with a vast radio telescope, which played a crucial part in the 1969 moon landings—a tale recounted in the 2000 Sam Neill movie *The Dish*.

This might sound inauspicious for people in the library business, but this small community has proved to be a passionate testing ground for literacy schemes that have since spread across Australia, and beyond.

Parkes was the birthplace of Paint the Town REaD, an Australian nonprofit scheme that promotes reading with preschoolers through street fairs and community events. Among their most unusual innovations was the use of literacy themed placemats in settings like McDonalds or local pubs, where they hoped to capture the attention of families less likely to visit the library. Paint the Town REaD has now formed a nationwide franchise, while Parkes transitioned to a new, library-led community model based around a month-long celebration of literacy—"Readtember"—which focuses on innovative provision for children, young people and families.

Under the "Readtember" banner, Parkes' librarians have launched a range of experiments, from community book blogs to unconventional teen writers' workshops such as "How to Con Your Way Into A Million Dollars" and even a father-and-baby scheme, "Rocket Man," which encourages dads to build souped-up boxcar racers in a library setting.

Corporate support has encouraged the town to embrace multimedia in its literacy activities. A local web design firm provided the original Paint the Town REaD scheme with a website pro-bono as an opportunity to experiment with multi-platform compatibility. Andrew Garratt, a community relations officer with the local mine, introduced a book trailer video competition from his previous role with a Queensland coal terminal. Andrew's own passion for literacy and innovation in community work was instrumental in creating a partnership between libraries, business, and local educators to collaboratively deliver youth literacy workshops.

Mindful of the need to reach out to an audience of varying technology abilities, local librarians offer activities ranging from computer-based workshops for tech-savvy high schoolers to oral storytelling with kids, teens, and toddlers. In Parkes Library's courtyard, teens could even use their phones or MP3 players to provide music for outdoor karaoke, using a solar-powered loudspeaker created from a plastic trashcan.

The most exciting and successful example of this multimodal approach was a holiday activity which invited middle schoolers to play a real-life equivalent of the Angry Birds video game. Children could play the game on a laptop connected to an overhead projector in the community hall, before building (and then demolishing!) their own giant towers using industrial cardboard waste.

In such activities, youth engagement is as much about respecting the interests of children and young people as using the latest technology. A real-life cardboard version of Angry Birds might be more relevant than spending your library budget on the latest tablet computers—it's a question of pop culture as much as hardware. Sheffield University's Jackie Marsh has argued that:

> Popular culture is, for many children in industrialized societies, a major source of pleasure. Much of children's popular culture is related to the media. Television shows, video games, comics or the latest Disney film provide a plethora of texts with which children become emotionally engaged.[1]

Marsh bases her findings on a project that used literacy materials based on the TV show *Teletubbies* into a preschool setting, but her argument resonates with librarians who serve older audiences, too.

Miguel Rodriguez, an educational technology developer for teachers in the San Diego Unified School District, curates "Schlockfest," a monthly celebration of pulp horror movies in San Diego libraries.

In an email discussion, Rodriguez said it's vital that "librarians should familiarise themselves with some of the popular literature or films that their kids are interested in. It makes younger readers and viewers more inclined to talk. Discussing what it is about particular stories that draws us to them is a good way to get anyone thinking about their own interests, and how writers or directors use those interests in order to access our emotions."

In the case of both the Australian zombie event and San Diego's horror cinema screenings, there's a fine line to be walked between acknowledging darker topics and keeping your library a welcoming place for all ages.

For Miguel, the trick lies in managing the public's expectations, and using the fact that social media has empowered people to discuss fringe aspects of culture:

One of the effects of new media has been to take things that were once relegated to the shadows and make them more familiar. People can write intelligently and share their thoughts on a seemingly infinite number of topics. I think this has lifted some of the fear and stigma that can accompany an unknown quantity.

It is acutely obvious with horror how film—or any storytelling really—is not a one-way operation. It's a communication between creator and audience, with the spectators bringing their own baggage, experience, and personalities to the transaction. In this way, I think that horror is the most sincere of genres, in that is strips away all pretensions if it is to be effective. Those are the kinds of things about horror that I'd like to explore in any setting, but particularly in a library setting, where people are potentially open to learning something new.

So long as plenty of warning is given, audience members can make a choice about whether or not to attend any event. If I was to present and discuss a film that is more extreme, every bit of literature I used to promote the event would include a disclaimer about the content. I would also talk about that in the introduction, and give a clear and concise reason for programming the title. I would also point out that our strong reactions to material are great topics for discussion and exploration.

Miguel's project draws on contemporary technology and social media to help connect library users with the pop culture of the past. Successful projects like Shlockfest and the Tullamore zombies raise the question: where exactly is the balancing point between embracing technology and serving our communities?

JUST ADD IPADS?: TECHNOLOGY AT THE SERVICE OF COMMUNITY AND CREATIVITY

It's vital for libraries to be at the forefront of new media technologies. We don't need to be ahead of the cutting edge—you wouldn't want to be the person who bought the twenty-first century version of Betamax for your library system!—but if, as R. David Lankes has argued, the business of today's public library is facilitating knowledge creation, we need to have the latest tools at our disposal.[2]

In Lankes' vision, librarianship is about facilitating access to knowledge and culture, letting people find and make meaning from the world on their own terms. This conception of the public library empowers us to make a case to local government for the uniqueness and relevance of our services beyond "books on shelves." It's worth remembering that UNESCO's Missions of the Public Library emphasise creativity, performance, and a broad definition of culture alongside the business of reading—and that they don't even mention the word "book" once![3]

Twenty-first century librarians should be aiming to transcend traditional forms of literacy—but it is still necessary to put goals before gadgets; to consider community needs before rushing to loot the media resources cupboard. It takes more than the acquisition of a few iPads to make your community event effective and relevant.

Before the zombie event, the Parkes library team had attempted to run a series of teen book blogging workshops, which demonstrated this truth. The hope was that a teen version of the town's successful adult blog could be run by local youth, but a lack of community need undermined an opportunity to create a credible and exciting social media program. Teens weren't asking for a book review blog in Parkes Shire, local schools were unwilling to commit to the site, and the project sputtered quietly out of existence.

Parkes learned its lesson fast and, when devising the zombie event, the team were careful to call on existing online communities for support. This meant supplementing radio coverage by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation with text and photographs from the broadcaster's own teen blogging scheme, ABC Open. The preexisting commitment of these teen bloggers, and the well-established ABC blogging platform, allowed Parkes to make the most of social media during the event.

For Parkes Shire's zombies, putting technology at the service of community goals meant exploiting social media for global impact, but also using conventional media like radio to reach the regional community, and exploiting word of mouth to build the library's reputation around Tullamore itself.

At first, the Tullamore team had hoped the ABC could deliver an Orson Welles-style fictionalised news report. This proved difficult to sell to the ABC's producers. To be fair, Welles' famous 1938 production was a drama mistaken for a news report. It was perhaps expecting too much for the ABC's news team to willingly put out false reports of a zombie apocalypse on their morning news show!

ABC's media coverage included a live telephone interview immediately before the event, live tweeting during the day and a follow-up radio feature, as well as blogging from the ABC Open teens.

This marriage of conventional and social media was vital—radio coverage across the Central West region of New South Wales reached many nonusers of social media, but it was complemented by the ABC blogs and Twitter feed.

This created a cache of media coverage, accessible online, which allowed people around the world to learn about the Tullamore event. The Cultural Gutter, a Canadian Arts Council-funded website devoted to "disreputable art in all its forms," collated the initial coverage for a global audience, and follow-up blogs appeared at the Australian National Year of Reading website, Library as Incubator Project, and the newsletter of the Youth Libraries Group in London, England. Such content demonstrated the event's impact to Parkes Library's managers, funders, and community partners.

Closer to home, it was vital that Tullamore itself felt the value and impact of the event—that the zombie siege became a topic of conversation around the dinner tables and barstools

of the town.

The use of community volunteers—including a local politician—to play the zombies was key in this regard. Feedback from the event showed that participants felt pride in contributing directly to a special day of community learning. 'This was more than just baking cakes, or helping out at the school sports day!" one zombie told library staff.

Volunteers shared their stories of zombie adventure with friends and relatives over the weekend following the event. This kind of word-of-mouth support is invaluable: although both traditional and social media have a greater impact at the regional, national, and international levels, it's important to remember the immediate audience of the community your library serves.

The creative and interactive quality of the zombie event—the sense for the students of being immersed in a live-action role-play—has wider implications for library technology and our services to the community.

Consider, for example, library websites.

At Herefordshire Council—a county authority in the United Kingdom—I was appointed as a web editor on special project to streamline 3000 webpages, edited by 500 users, to a "one-stop shop" website that would cover all council services, from waste disposal to health, using a no-frills frequently asked questions format.[4]

There are benefits to this approach. The notion of a one-stop shop can be less patronising to young people. Rather than drown official websites with lame and dated design frills like graffiti fonts, the Top Tasks mentality assumes that young service users access these sites much as adults do—to find information about local services, not spurious entertainment which is better provided elsewhere.

However, there's a risk that taking this approach will restrict opportunities to engage users creatively. Especially where library services are located within local government, there may be pressure on them not to employ a separate library web team.

Christchurch Libraries, in New Zealand, provide an excellent example of the benefits of a more creative and independent approach to library website design. With two official languages—English and Te Reo M ori—Kiwi librarians have a bilingual literacy obligation.

Christchurch's M ori Services unit, together with Danny McNeil from the library's Programmes, Events & Learning team, led a project to deliver language learning opportunities through interactive online exploration. The resulting website, *Te Whata Raki*, allows young library users to move through a virtual landscape with written and spoken M ori language elements.

Danny explains:

> The "exploring' element was something we decided to initiate in order to make the user feel like they are actually part of the process or at liberty to shape their own learning.
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> The hope is, each year a new aspect of the world will be added that will be equally entertaining and informative in order to keep users coming back. Customers having to explore the site initiates active participation and allows us to make additions based on usage and feedback.[5]

The creative application of technology and media in this way goes to the heart of the public library's mission. In Australia, the State Library of Victoria's Education Manager Hamish Curry has been exploring game-based learning in library environments, blending high-tech gaming with more traditional options like backgammon. In an email interview about his work, he wrote:

> People refer to young learners as 'digital natives'—this kind of stereotyping only serves to shift assumptions to young people, clumping them all together as crazed tech-wizards and games addicts. We know that just isn't true. Games are effective because they represent the evolution of storytelling, where we are part of a narrative where our level of control and decision-making is heightened. Games can pitch a 13 year old against a 30 year old on a level playing field.
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> Bringing physical games alongside video games creates a closer connection—and it is this mindset that has seen the controller and the motion-sensing device become physically connected back to us. I've seen a room full of games consoles and a group of teenage boys sit down and play a game of chess. I've seen grandparents bring children to a games event, and end up playing Kinect themselves.
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> Libraries should be open to not mandating what learning happens, and instead engage with the learning that people want to happen, and resource yourself like mad to help them. Twenty-first-century learning has become the catchall phrase for taking learning in new directions, largely facilitated by technology, but in reality it is about valuing "adventurous" learning, driven by motivation, lead by teamwork, supported by lots of communication.

Hamish's work embodies the idea that libraries are learning spaces, but not in a conventional sense. Education in the English-speaking world is increasingly about passing tests and meeting educational standards. Of course, visiting the library may help a student to pass their exams, but pass marks are not the library's *raison d'être*. Instead, public libraries are spaces where citizens can learn on their own terms.

This means that learning in the library can look less like a lesson, and more like an adventure.

Zombie hordes are optional.

References

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4. For more on this approach to web design, see Gerry McGovern, *The Stranger's Long Neck* ([city?] A&C Black, 2010).

5. Christchurch City Libraries, "Te Whata Raki," last modified June 30, 2012, accessed April 27, 2013, http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/Te-Whata-Raki/index.html.