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New Adventures in Screencasting¹

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Whether it's a funny video of the Internet's favorite cat, Maru, jumping into boxes, or the season finale of *Breaking Bad*, or an evening playing *Wii Fit* with friends, our love of video and interactive adventure is self evident. There are universal elements to great videos and games that drive large audiences: beautiful cinematography and graphics, engaging and purposeful screenplays and storylines, unforgettable soundtracks, and a brand name that makes viewers and players want to return for more. Libraries can, and should, employ these elements in their own videos to promote our services and educate our users.

When Jing was first released in 2007, it catapulted screencasting onto the Library 2.0 bandwagon, adding yet another online tool to the instruction librarian toolbox. The popular free version lacked editing tools, frustrating the perfectionists who took several tries to record a two minute screencast without errors. Since the emergence of Jing screencasting has matured as a technology practice. A small industry of professionals creates beautiful promotional and training screencasts for enterprise clients. Large companies create extensive video training for customers. The Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org) and its army of erudite volunteers harness the power of short video tutorials to flip the global classroom and disseminate free knowledge. For libraries, screencasts are a promising tool, and despite the apparent maturing of our practice, there is still room for innovation.

Currently, library screencasts tell linear stories. A “how to submit your thesis to our institutional repository” video (Flynn, 2012) makes perfect sense when told in perfect sequence. When graduation requirements are at stake, students aren't interested in deviating from clearly defined outcomes. At the College of Wooster, all seniors are required to complete an independent study thesis and submit a digital copy to our IR, and last year the Libraries created a screencast to visually guide them through the online submission form. Thanks to a strong policy, and perhaps to the fact that our senior class barely outnumbered the screencast YouTube view count, we had 100% compliance.

While linear screencasts are best in some situations, what if screencasts gave viewers more choices? New teaching models emphasize peer-to-peer interaction and participatory technologies to accommodate multiple learning preferences. As librarians we constantly look for new ways to break out of the lecture model, and give students more control over their learning. Screencasting affords viewers autonomy over how much and how fast they want to learn, but just as new teaching models are balancing one-way lectures with peer interaction, screencasts should allow viewers to make decisions in their learning adventure.

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Choose Your Own Adventure books popularized the notion that stories could have multiple endings and multiple ways of reaching them. In our new media environment, dozens of YouTube artists have crafted Choose Your Own Adventure style movies, where viewers make decisions and control their character's destiny. We do this already in our teaching, where our students take control every time they ask a question, raising new research issues that make every teaching experience unique. Our library screencasts could do more to emulate not only what innovative YouTube content creators have done, but also what our library instructors do every day.

Some library concepts are too complex for a linear video. Interlibrary Loan and Course Reserves are two classic examples of library services that, depending on who you are, and what type of material you are requesting, can take the user on many tangents. Using software from Flixmaster, Emily Thompson (2012) created an experimental screencast that explains how to put items on Reserve, with interactive buttons that let instructors choose from among electronic reserve, books to movies and CDs as next steps in their learning adventure. Inspired by the possibilities of adding interactive buttons to videos, I created a similar series of Interlibrary Loan screencasts using YouTube annotations as buttons, in response to learning that a large number of students initiate ILL requests of materials already full-text discoverable through our databases (Flynn, 2013).

The College of Wooster Interlibrary Loan screencast adventure begins by asking viewers if they have an Illiad account. Interactive buttons using the YouTube annotation feature let our Illiad account owners go directly to the next video which asks them if they are interested in books or articles. Illiad novices can click another button to watch a new video showing them how to set up an account. Meanwhile, users who are interested in books will be directed to a new video showing them how to navigate our dizzying array of consortial catalog arrangements, from searching our local catalog, to OhioLINK, our union catalog, and finally to searching WorldCat. On the other hand, those interested in articles are directed to a new video on how to use our Summon discovery layer to streamline fulfilling an Illiad request. Rather than try to cram every possibility into one video, an interactive screencast presents users with options to tailor instruction to their individual needs.

More experienced users are also provided interactive buttons to save time. While offering an introductory explanation of Interlibrary Loan, a button titled "Skip Introduction" appears in the top left corner. In the other video segment explaining how to search our local catalogs, a button appears in the top left saying "I've already searched CONSORT and OhioLINK", giving experienced users the ability to skip directly to the WorldCat instructions. The more control that we give our viewers over their screencast experience, the better we can tailor their learning outcomes to varying levels of experience and knowledge. Ultimately, this could lead to a higher level of satisfaction with library services overall, strengthening the library's brand in the mind of constituents.

Planning, recording, editing and marketing library screencasts offers plenty of opportunities for collaboration in your library. Screencast production can and should emulate Hollywood film production in which work units are distributed among a team according to skills and interest.

Planning screencast adventures may be the most time intensive task. Your team will want to cover topics that are complex enough to justify making screencasts interactive and have wide appeal to guarantee an audience. Most frequently asked questions at the reference desk could provide a source of potential topics. Instruction librarians could also assist with planning by assigning screencasts to students to watch before class, which could save precious time our one-shot workshops so woefully lack.

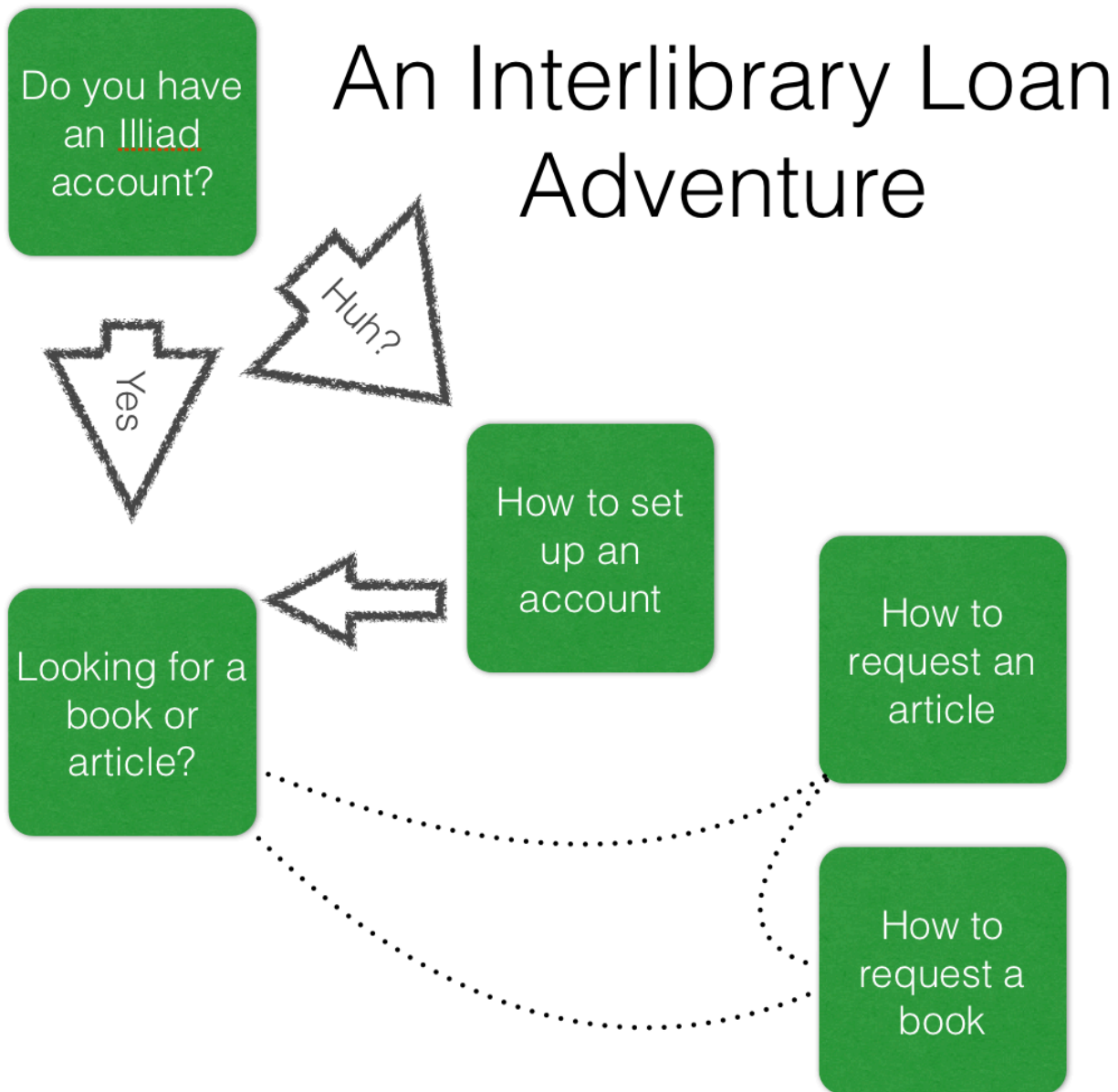


Image 1. *You could use a diagram to chart your adventure.*

Writing a script first before recording a screencast is important for the same reasons politicians always read from a teleprompter. You can meticulously plan exactly what to say and how to say it, saving the viewer a lot of “ahs” and “ums.” Designing a screencast around a script also ensures a video is edited for

concision. Upload your scripts to a shared drive or Google Docs to easily seek input from both the team members, and the staff directly involved in the subject the screencast addresses.

In order to create beautiful screencasts, high quality software and equipment is a must. You'll need software (e.g. Screenflow, Camtasia, Captivate) with concise editing capabilities, and USB condenser microphones (e.g. Blue Yeti) will make your narrator sound like an NPR guest. Access to the necessary technology may deter budget conscious libraries eager to stick to free solutions. Luckily, libraries have trended towards offering media production spaces as a service, one shining example being Skokie Public Library's Digital Media Lab, where community members have access to the equipment and staff necessary to create podcasts, videos and art (Jacobsen & Anthony, 2011). Securing software and equipment to bring your screencast adventure to life may foster collaboration with campus partners. Your narrator need not be a member of your planning team. The College of Wooster recruited vocal talent from students and library staff whose defined roles normally wouldn't include emerging technologies.

Once you've finished creating the videos and in-line button graphics, upload them to your library's YouTube channel. YouTube has emerged as the world's leading online video platform, allowing anyone to upload videos to a channel, create playlists, and host discussions while offering flexible distribution options to desktop and mobile devices. YouTube analytics allows you to see who watches your videos, where they come from, and measure engagement by identifying how long it takes for the average viewer to click away from your videos. Non-profit institutions can even request more powerful YouTube accounts that permit videos up to 10 hours long, live streaming, and no ads. The College of Wooster Libraries YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/cowlibraries> benefits from such an arrangement.

After uploading to YouTube, you can create interactive annotations using their web editor. Common uses of annotations include callout buttons asking viewers to subscribe to the channel, and reminders of similar videos that might interest you. Buttons in "Choose Your Own Adventure" styled videos are a niche use of the annotations feature. Fortunately for the time-constrained library team, the web editor has a short learning curve, and will allow you to link to other videos in your screencast adventure, or link out to a library web page, such as a research consultation request form.

Displaying and marketing screencasts is another critical piece to this process. Advertisers tailor their messages to certain demographics and contexts in order to maximize influence over time. For example, I've noticed how Hulu packs cooking shows with ads for frozen food products! Similarly, screencasts should be promoted to specific audiences in specific contexts in order to maximize their impact. The College of Wooster Libraries placed our "How to submit your senior thesis" video on multiple websites discussing the thesis submission policy, and directly on our institutional repository's front page. We shared the video to communicate policies to faculty advisors and students emailing us procedural questions. One direct marketing idea for an Interlibrary Loan video would be to send the video link to users who request items that already exist in your collection. This targeted effort would have a far greater impact than solely posting the video on your website.

Ultimately, the decision to initiate a screencast project will involve a cost-benefit analysis. Given the time necessary to plan your videos, learn the software and equipment, and edit the screencast to perfection, it's fair to ask whether or not screencasts are the best solution to an identified problem. Lori Mestre (2012)

led a usability study at the University of Illinois that compared two groups of students asked one group of students to watch video tutorials to learn how to search the ERIC database while another followed static web pages with screenshots, and compared student preferences for both. The results of the study cast doubt on the conventional wisdom that students will prefer a video tutorial over static pages, even for those students with a self-identified visual learning preference. While Mestre's study raises important questions about screencasting's value proposition, I believe she raises broader questions relating to instructional technology.

Building interactive, beautiful screencasts takes time and energy, and Mestre (2012) states that “[w]ith demands on time at a premium it is important to evaluate whether the efforts result in the desired goals” (p. 258). I couldn't agree more - a significant investment of time and capital in a technology solution should aim to solve a clearly defined problem. In the case of interactive screencasts, we found that students were incorrectly requesting articles and books already present in our collection and sought to use a screencast to inform them of their options. However, even a clever technology solution can't overcome structural differences in user preferences. One student in Mestre's study wanted the video tutorial to finish so they could start applying what they learned to the ERIC database. Either this means that screencasts need to be as concisely edited as possible, or perhaps screencasts aren't the best medium to take a user step by step through a process highly dependent on repeating visual instructions.

On the other hand, more quantitative evaluations may reveal the effectiveness of videos. YouTube analytics allows you to measure viewer engagement by graphing the percentage of viewers who click away from your video. According to Google's own statistics, most YouTube viewers click away from videos long before the halftime intermission. Nevertheless, Wooster's “How to digitally submit your senior thesis” video was watched from start to finish by over 90% of its viewers (the number of viewers almost equaling the number of seniors). That level of engagement can only be explained two ways: 1) students eager to fulfill a graduation requirement were unwilling to miss important facts, or 2) students genuinely liked the screencast's production style. Either way, despite spending hours planning, editing and marketing, I can state with confidence that the effort led to desired goals.

I'd like to see further research evaluate screencasts on multiple dimensions. What effect does concise editing, visual engagement and professional production quality have on learning outcomes? Perhaps it might be shown that with a heavy investment in creating amazing screencasts with interactive features, you can effectively address the problem they are designed to solve. Perhaps screencasts are best designed to address questions that have institution-wide appeal, like how to fulfill a graduation requirement, and advertising the general services that libraries provide.

There is still room for innovation in screencasting. Our viewers watch high quality screencasts on the web and highly produced content on television, raising their expectations for library productions. The planning and aesthetics of screencasts can and should be improved. High quality software and equipment is within reach of more libraries than ever, especially when on-campus partnerships are considered. Interactive elements mimicking “Choose Your Own Adventure” can tailor a screencast series to individual learning outcomes, give viewers more control, leading to increased engagement and service. While we shouldn't expect our videos to go viral like Maru, we can aspire to be informative at the point of need, engaging enough to keep them watching, and helpful enough to be share-worthy.

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