

"It's My Library": An Immersive, Empathic and Collaborative Approach to Online Storytelling Design

Yue Wu

Peking University Library, Beijing, China

wuy@lib.pku.edu.cn



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Abstract:

This paper presents a case study on the online space design for Peking University's new library, which is scheduled to finish by 2020. Building a new library traditionally focuses more on organizational planning, but in today's changing environment, it's imperative to create a supportive community among students, faculty and alumni. We present 2020: It's My Library, an interactive web portal for community members & donors to understand the project from multiple facets and to participate in the project. Different from day-to-day library project portals, we explored a user-centered approach which, from users' perspective, can be summarized as a tri-fold process: Immerse, Empathize, and Collaborate.

Firstly, we immerse users in the environment by utilizing advanced interactive design techniques (e.g. background video, bold palette, edgeless layout, etc.). This creates a dynamic and impactful visual representation, and establishes a vibrant branding of the new library that resonates with the digital generation.

Secondly, we strategize "mutual empathy" throughout the content. Utilizing the auto-play video stories, student-contributed write-ups and clips, and real-life imagery, we start the conversation from their side, showing our empathy on a personal and emotional level, that we understand what the community cares: pain points, decision-making, impacts, and vision.

Thirdly, we genuinely invite the community to collaborate. Traditional library services are in decline, and we must adapt to the changing patterns of knowledge acquisition and sharing by the help from our audience. We reinforce the theme of "My library" by setting up a forum to actively seek feedback to meet their needs. We also created online donation channel to secure funds from donors.

In summary, our approach provides a user-centered design framework to engage students, faculty, alumni and general public in the building of new library space. We believe that projects with similar scope could benefit from this practice.

Project Background

In recent years, many Chinese universities have started library renovation or new building projects. The rapid development and use of information and digitization technologies is having a direct impact on teacher's teaching strategies and student's learning methods. And literature resources are quickly transforming from paper-based materials to rich and connected media repository. Old equipment, crowded space and traditional services in libraries have been unable to keep up with the changes.

Peking University Library is facing similar challenges. The deteriorating building condition and dated interior space planning of Peking University Library (hereafter referred to as "the library") have been unable to meet the community's needs, and in recent years it started to seriously restrict the development of new library services. Today, small class teaching is becoming increasingly popular. Students' learning methods is also changing from textbook learning to diversified forms such as community learning, e-learning, etc. To keep pace with the new trends, Peking University Library must extend the historical function, upgrading from the knowledge hub into a multi-functional learning and cultural center on campus, which provides comprehensive learning, research and teaching support, literature resource services and extracurricular entertainment. It is an imperative decision for PKU-lib to launch a new library project.

This project is comprehensive and complex. The library has two buildings before the project: the West Library and the East Library. Both buildings will be affected: East Library will be renovated thoroughly, and the West Library will be demolished and reconstructed on site. In addition, the project also includes the construction of a new library - Chinese Rare Books Library. The entire project is expected to finish by 2020.

The project also has huge impact on library services and communities. Because Peking University Library has the largest number of readers among China's universities, the project is one of the most impactful projects in China's library history - more than 130,000 users using the library frequently will be affected. For the majority of students and faculty who focus on study and research, the project brings more annoyance than being helpful - the construction work will affect many normal library services such as study space availability, collection locations, temporary closures, opening hours, etc. For many other people, notably alumni, campus buildings are their living memories and often serve as a symbol of psychological connection to the university. Without proper education and alumni community engagement, the demolition of old building and replacing it with a brand new library will to some degree bring misunderstanding and alienation.

The unusually large scale and impact of the project calls for an unconventional communication strategy. With the proliferation of digital and mobile technologies in China, the most effective way to reach out to campus communities is via an online project site. For this project, because of the diverse backgrounds among students, faculty, alumni and other communities, the website must show recognition and understanding of their needs, and communicate from their perspectives, in order to effectively enable communities to understand the project background, establish proper expectations, and eventually contribute to the project. In short, we have to adapt to the user-centered methodology.

A User-Centered Approach

In this approach, we aim to first attract visitors using impactful visuals, hoping to establish a vibrant branding and environment that resonates with the digital generation. On the content level, our goal is to fully engage the visitors, showing that we care deeply about their needs and pain points, and also helping them understand the project vision and scope from their perspective. We also genuinely invite the community to collaborate, because we need to hear from and understand our users to adapt to the changing patterns of knowledge acquisition and sharing. We named this website “2020: It’s My Library” (hereafter referred to as “IML”). We summarized this user-centered approach as a tri-fold user engagement process: Immerse, Empathize, and Collaborate.

Immerse

Immerse, by its definition, is the process of involving oneself deeply in a particular activity or interest¹. In the context of web design, it’s often called “immersive design”, a design technique that fully submerges users in the virtual narratives by the use of interactivity, motion, and sound, to an extent that often makes users less aware that they are browsing a web page. It blends traditional informative qualities with engaging and emotional elements. As bandwidth increases and HTML5 technology becoming more widespread than ever, even a complex interactive site can load quickly now, which heightens user experiences across the web².

IML website employs immersive video storytelling to grab visitors’ attention and to intrigue anticipation when visitors first land on the website. An adaptive, full-screen background video is positioned in the above the fold area of the homepage. This background video is the centerpiece of the immersive narrative: when visitors load the homepage for the first time, they see the slogan “The library I want” gradually fading in above the captivating background image of Peking University Library. Shortly after this, the still background images transforms into a background video and starts playing automatically (with the image being the first frame). Visitors are then immersed in the short, beautiful, and emotional movie about the library’s present and future, with a piece of light music. This step-by-step narrative is attention-grabbing, raises the visitors’ interest, and encourages them to explore the website.

Immersive techniques are also used to build a newer and vibrant library image. The website obtains visitors’ attention by using a bright blue color with high saturation, which is inherited from the main color palette of Peking University Library website. Psychological studies show that color is the first language for people to get information³. When the human visual organs are observing objects, the feeling for colors is far stronger than the feeling for the body in the first few seconds⁴. IML uses saturated color as main color tone to foster strong and attractive visual impact. Moreover, instead of setting a unified tone for the whole website, IML sets every section a different saturated color to create a colorful and playful website. The change of colors between each section reduces visual fatigue when browsing. It is also very easy for visitors to know which section they are in by reading color.

Edgeless layout is used to fully utilize the screen real estate, imitating the print-based poster design to maximize the visual immersion and impact. Edgeless in website design means maximizing the webpage size, using as many pixels as possible to highlight the content itself other than the container. IML uses large-sized color blocks, pictures and video to divide the

homepage into multiple visual modules. In each module, the website only present one topic with a large area of blank spaces, which would help visitors focus on reading the contents other than distracted by other visual noises.

Persistent navigation is provided when scrolling the page, with the purpose of indicating the rich contents and engages visitors in the web architecture. Fixed navigation allows for easy access to a website's core functionalities regardless of where a visitor may be in the midst of a page's content. Visitors can feel free to immerse themselves in lines of content without worrying about scroll all the way back up the page to switch between each sections.

The IML website utilizes interactive techniques to engage visitors. It creates a sense of immersion.

Empathize

Empathize, an often-heard word these days, is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of the other⁵. As the nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman said, empathy has four attributes: perspective taking, staying out of judgment, recognizing emotion of another, and communicating the emotion. To empathize someone, we need to see the situation through his eyes without judgment. Also, we should be in touch with our own experience in order to understand his feelings and talk about it⁶.

In our case, we are not just asking students to empathize the library view - due to the large scale and impact of the project, empathy needs to be two-way: library empathize communities, and communities empathize the library - we call this "mutual empathy". On one hand, to build a user-friendly and user-centric new library, the library must try its best to find out and comprehend the pain points, needs, and demands from a variety of communities. On the other hand, to willingly support and contribute to the project, community members must be aware of the problems Peking University Library is facing and understand the vision of the new library project. In other words, "mutual empathy" means that the library and community members both need to think in other's point of view nonjudgmentally, understand each other's feelings, and communicate about each other's feelings.

Peking University Library is facing a series of problems, which are hardly noticed by community members. According to *China University Facts Database 2014*, the total number of PKU-lib readers (134,245) ranks No.1 among China's Universities now, but the overall floor area ranks only No.16. The qualified floor area rate of the library is 44% and the total seat number of the library is only 22% of the standard number in accordance with *China's national architecture planning index of colleges and universities*. Additionally, since Peking University is a research university, the vast majority of collections have high preservation value, which leads to an extra low elimination rate. Even when digital publishing is becoming more common nowadays, the collection increment is still more than 100,000 per year. The west library building, which was finished in 1975, is too old to bear such a great pressure on its collection stack floors. As a result, the library has to disassemble the collection layout, and makes simple and repetitive physical works like book moving a routine work, so as to ease the floor pressure and ensure the normal library operation at the same time. Since most of these problems are imperceptible, the construction state of the library seems to be still good enough to offer normal services. In the view of community members, a new library project would be a waste of money and time.

Empathy is feeling with people. IML starts the conversation from the community side in order to recognize their emotion and cares. It collected three small movies about Peking University Library in the Memory section. By watching the movies, the library can look at itself from a brand new perspective, because the directing and shooting of the movies were entirely accomplished by the Peking University students. Moreover, the website set a yearning section. It lists a lot of articles with real-life photos collecting from community members. As we know, articles are usually a carrier of affection, thoughts and experience. The library can know more about its audience on an emotional level through their writing.

In order to invoke visitors' empathy towards library, the project website utilize not only community generated content but also information from the library. The scenes of the library in the movies and articles might recall the visitors' memory in library and strengthen their connection with the library. Moreover, the website introduces the original intention and profile of the new library project in Project section to help the community to understand the project. Additionally, IML releases the latest news and timely service adjustment notices through News section and Service Change section to reduce the influence brought by construction, and also to show that the library cares about their library experience.

Collaborate

Needs from community members have shifted thoroughly with the fast changing of knowledge acquisition and sharing pattern. It is no longer enough for the library to offer the services we have to the community members. We need to build a user-friendly library and offer the services they want. As Merrilee Proffitt highlights the finding in her report at The OCLC Library in the Life of the User meeting 2016, empowering the people who come through our doors and engaging them will help us to better serve them⁷. A new library project needs not only the wisdom of the librarians and also the help from visitors. It should not only be a project leading by the library about the physical architecture design and construction work, but also be a project involving interactive communication and collaboration with readers.

To provide accurate and satisfactory service, it is important to hear from visitors and refine their demands. In 2020: It's My Library, we offers three sections, My Library, Contact Us and Support Us, to encourage visitors to participate in the new library project.

The requirements of the communities have been shifted radically and become specific and very different from each other. Staff and students are treated as a whole community in Peking University Library now, as if they all have homogeneous requirement like book borrow & return, self-study etc. However, as small class teaching and community learning are increasingly popular, community is becoming more and more fragmented, which can be as large as a department or as small as a interest group. In the website, visitors can express their thoughts, opinions on the new library project through My Library and Contact Us. We also provide an online forum in My Library for visitors to discuss and give advices, and we regularly collect the requirements to enrich our new library plan and gather suggestions to make timely adjustments to the construction. In addition, visitors can also contact us by leaving message or use other contact methods we offer in Contact Us. We establish several communication channels between visitors and PKU-lib to ensure that their voices can be heard, and their needs can be meet.

In addition, we emphasize the concept “It’s my library” by offering the feedback and donation features with the most eye-catching positions, to let visitors feel like part of the project and know that we want and care about their contribution. First, we set an icon “2020 the library I want” above the browser-sized video background on the first screen of the homepage, connecting directly to the online forum. Then we put the “My library” section the left first item in the navigation because the common reading habits are from left to right. What’s more, we set an independent advertising area in the homepage for Support Us section to attract donations, which can lead to the online donation system directly.

Summary

We targeted the project website 2020: It’s My Library as an online interactive space. In the website, we first use interactive design techniques to draw the visitor's attention. After visitors enter the website, we build connection with them by applying mutual empathy throughout the content level. Lastly, we sincerely invite them to participate in the project by providing online communication and donation. In conclusion, we sum up with a user-centered three-tier design framework: Immerse, Empathize, and Collaborate.

¹ New Oxford American Dictionary

² Immersive Experience. <http://mashable.com/2013/04/25/immersive-experience/#0c4Euk.naEq5>

³ Ti Jia, Li Ji. Web Interface Design Based on Visual Information Transmission. Packaging Engineering. 2017 (2): 243-245

⁴ Cui Wei, Tan Huaneng. Color and Composition. Beijing: China Textile & Apparel Press.2003

⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

⁶ The four quality of empathy. <http://www.conversationagent.com/2015/06/the-four-qualities-of-empathy.html>

⁷ Is your library user centered. <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2016/02/is-your-library-user-centered>