

Confessions
of an

Aca-Fan

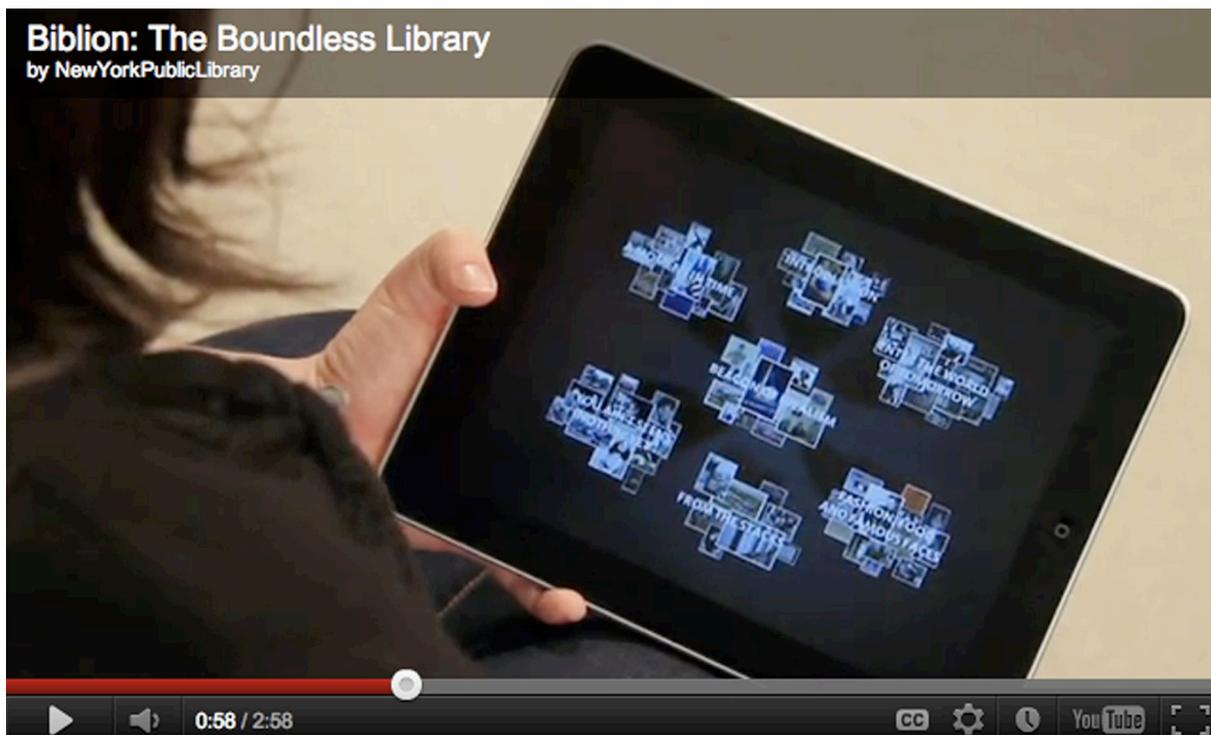
The Official Weblog of

Henry Jenkins

June 1, 2011

How The New York Public Library is Sharing “The World of Tomorrow” Now: An Interview with Deanna Lee

I am now the proud owner of an iPad. I'd been meaning to get one for some time, but what motivated me to make the leap was the release of *Biblion*, an extraordinary new app developed by the New York Public Library to showcase and contextualize their rich collection of materials surrounding the 1939 New York World's Fair.



I was honored to be asked to participate in this great new venture of the New York Public Library. The App includes an interview which describes the ways that the Fair translated early ideas from science fiction into a physical location which promised people a chance to see the World of Tomorrow and offers insights into the continued hold that the Fair has over the popular imagination, including its role in shaping “retrofuturist” trends in contemporary comics and novels. In the interview, I share a little about my own lifelong fascination with the Fair:

When I was a child, my godfather and godmother went to the 1964 New York World's Fair and brought back a program which described in detail each of the pavilions. I spent endless hours reading the descriptions and imagining what the buildings were like, somehow not quite grasping that the Fair itself was long gone. As I've gotten older, though, my interests has been drawn towards the 1939 Fair, in part because of my intellectual engagement with science fiction as a genre, and in part because of my personal fascination with the

style of that period. I have started to collect artifacts from the fair -- through antique shops when I am lucky, increasingly through eBay -- which exist in my collection alongside other remains of older media practices -- magic lantern slides, a 1920s era dictaphone, wax cylinders, Victorian stereoscope slides, Winsor McCay comic strip pages. Much of this constitutes "residual media" or what Bruce Sterling has called "dead media."

I prefer residual media because it suggests the "undead" presence of such media in our culture, the sense that bits and pieces of them have been left behind, shoved into the corners, often forgotten but still shaping the way we understand ourselves and the world. When I moved to Los Angeles last year, we ended up moving into a 1930 era Art Deco building, which reflects similar aesthetic sensibilities. My interest in the fair has been fueled by the fact that my Mother-in-Law grew up in Brooklyn and came to the event as a child. She had valued a medallion shaped like a Heinz Pickle which had somehow gotten lost through the years. When my wife found the item on eBay, she ordered it and snuck it back into her mother's jewelry box, just to mess with her mind and see how long it would take her to find it. The item, a cheap disposable novelty at the time, was welcomed with tearful nostalgia and shared laughter.

As for myself, I was born far too late to have attended the fair, so it remains only a mental construct -- as much an object of fantasy as a historical reality -- yet one which has become more material for me as I have been able to claim some bits and pieces from the fair for my own collection. Ironically, one of the key events at the Fair was the creation of a time capsule which sought to choose representative items from the 1930s and preserve them for the next generation. The time capsule is premised on the idea of scarcity -- that much of the past will be lost -- while today, so much of the junk people bought at the fair is still in circulation, thanks to eBay.

There has never before been such a rich resource for 1939 Worlds Fair buffs than what the New York Public Library has pulled together -- a rich mix of documents, photographs, videos, and audio files, coupled with smart contemporary writing which puts the events of the fair into a range of contexts, from the history of American diet to the ways the Fair was impacted by the encroaching events in Europe, from its place in the history of American media and domestic technology to the spectacular showmanship that shaped the Midway attractions.

Much like the 1939 World's Fair itself, Biblion represents a chance to see the World of Tomorrow...Today. The emergence of new publishing platforms should not simply be greeted with fear by public institutions or by the simple reproduction of traditional print books into new delivery systems. Rather, we need creative people to explore what e-publishing can do that expands the capacities of authors to convey information in powerful new ways, that enhances and broadens the capacity of print to include a wealth of other affordances, and which gets readers thinking about the reading process from new perspectives. Biblion takes a bold new step towards achieving all of these goals and it's fitting that the New York Public Library, one of our most established and cherished national institutions, is helping to guide our progress towards distant horizons. After all, the future is where we are going to be living for the rest of our lives.

The following is an interview with Deanna Lee, one of the primary architects of the Biblion project, which discusses both the discoveries they made digging through the New York Public Library's collection and the ways the design of this new app reflects the library's larger vision for e-publishing.

What has been the historic relationship of the New York Public Library and the Fair?

As early as 1936, the Fair's Director of Research and Library, Frank Monaghan, began discussing a "mutually advantageous working agreement" with New York Public Library Director H. M. Lydenberg. The Library would provide research and advice to the Fair--everything from information on previous fairs to input such

as Lydenberg's questioning of what language Time Capsule materials should be written in (an exchange included in the app). In exchange, the Library would receive all of the Fair archives and materials "to be preserved for posterity" (and for Biblion readers!).

What are some of the discoveries you made in pulling together the materials for this project?

There were so many treasures that emerged from the collection; and the 700-some items contained in the app represent just the tip of the iceberg. There were the poignant pieces such as the letter from the Czech Consul's wife (actually William Grimes' discovery while researching his book *Appetite City*--unexpectedly contained in the food boxes), many heartbreaking, and others even ridiculous. A glossary for words coined for the Fair and folders full of letters from people who were desperate for money offering up family members to the sideshows are both cited in the application. All of the contributors made interesting discoveries in the materials--from the real story behind William Grant Still's supposed "color-blind" selection as composer of the Theme Music, complete with administrators' correspondence weighing the pros and cons of how the race issue might play, to the process of how the documents were originally arranged and catalogued.

Finally, a constant source of amusement and admiration were the charming, informative captions by the Fair's PR guru Leo Casey and other publicity staff. In this app, not only do you see the original source items, but also the original backs and captions of the items. Just take a look at Casey's captions throughout the "New York is Calling" story on the AT&T exhibit where visitors could make free long-distance calls (E. B. White's favorite exhibit) and you'll see captions like "'Hey Mom! Send me some money' says Robert Craig, 16 years old, of Akron Ohio. Craig, who hitchhiked to the New York World's Fair, won a free telephone call...and promptly called home for bus fare."

What do you think the organizers of the Fair, who embraced "the World of Tomorrow," would have made of this contemporary mode of publishing?

I think Robert Kohn, the Fair Board of Design member responsible for defining the "Building the World of Tomorrow" theme, would have fully appreciated the potential of e-publishing, and what we have tried to open the door to, with this digital publication. As one can read in the app, in a memo titled "Catholicity of the Fair's Design," his vision of Tomorrow was right in sync with our idea of "Know the Past, Find the Future"--building upon traditional presentations of the written word to achieve a new "variety of expressions." The Fair, he said, "is attempting to use the past and the present as stepping stones toward a much better future," using "things that are available in the world of today and with which, as tools, the 'World of Tomorrow' is to be built." This is a great time for content producers doing just that through new directions in publishing.

Biblion has elements of a magazine -- rich and compelling stories -- and of an archive -- primary documents, photographs, audio and visual materials. What does this suggest about the ways that the multi-media potentials of the ebook may be rewriting the genres of academic and scholarly publication?

Biblion aims to provide an "infoscape" within which readers can not only experience but pursue and explore different story lines--guided by curators and scholars, but towards more personal journeys of academic discovery. It includes a magazine-like compilation of stories, galleries and essays--but moving beyond the traditional magazine experience, each person's reading of a story may lead to different places. It also has the

feel of a research archive--but moving beyond the experience of riffling through boxes of original source material to a process by which people group those multimedia source items into what become their personal stories.

There is a definite spatial aspect: the whole layout of information is metaphorically based on taking one into and through the Library stacks, entering through an exhibition wall as you might in a museum. After taking in that exhibition wall orientation, you often want to be able to choose which rooms you visit in which order, and which items to focus upon. Biblion is based on the premise that once original sources are given shape, infinite narratives emerge. We've referred to it as a multilinear reading experience, one in which you can jump from story to story, stack to stack, through multiple combinations of media.

For example, while reading Professor Ethan Robey's essay about the Westinghouse "Battle of the Centuries" competition between Mrs. Modern (with the new electric dishwasher) and Mrs. Drudge (hand-washing), one might follow an inter-story connection to see and learn about the model Electric Kitchen in the Town of Tomorrow. Another reader might be led to a second Westinghouse exhibit, the Time Capsule. Film of the Middleton family visiting the capsule can then lead to additional video of their other visits, or through the audio/video sort function to the "Cavalcade of Centaurs" soundtrack, newsreel, and more contained within the story lines; it's all very organic and integral. A particularly fun multimedia piece is an original piece--a recreation and remix of the Democracy exhibit. Using and incorporating designs, photographs, the script, score, and even lighting directions from the Fair records, we've made a video complete with 3D animation that rebuilds and imagines the experience of visiting the Fair's centerpiece futuristic city.

Overall, the presentation of multimedia was key--not as simple add-ons to written stories, but as elements one could experience in a variety of ways. And so, landscape or "gallery" view allows people to browse horizontally in a way that feels like research, flipping through and zooming in to photographs, memos, press releases, letters, telegrams, film, news clippings, posters, and more. At the same time, you have the option of experiencing the documents and media in a more traditional magazine-like way. In "reader" or portrait view, we've added text breaks to give the documents context and more of a story line, drawn from the extensive press materials by the Fair's public relations whizzes, and the extensive finding aid to the collection compiled by the Library's archivists and curators. The "discovery" here, for us, was actually about the idea of research--and translating it into a different, perhaps less intensive, activity. In order to bridge the ideas of searching/discovery and narrative--we had to provide context in which people would be encouraged to read the documents and see them as more than mere artifacts (things to look at instead of to read and to read about). Text breaks and narrative voice--providing just enough of an introduction as to encourage further exploration--ended up making the documents seem like entry points. In the end, the text breaks made the items feel more like actual content--parts of original and deep stories that in turn could lead to further narrative lines.

I would add that these last ideas came as a revelation to us--an evolution in how we came to present the material. We tried a variety of ways of incorporating and displaying media, including with differing amounts of text. What you see in Biblion today evolved from and is part of a whole discovery process in creating the app with the tremendous developers and designers at Potion.

Do you have other future projects planned? If so, can you share any details?

The Library has a number of new digital projects underway, including a crowdsourcing project now in beta, to transcribe tens of thousands of historical restaurant menus from 1840 to the present that are in our digital gallery menu collection (you can find out more and take part, at menus.nypl.org).

We're also preparing for next year's 100th anniversary of John Cage's birth a multimedia "living archive"--a website featuring music performance videos narrated by professional musicians, students, and anyone interested in contributing to the understanding of Cage's philosophy and the process of interpreting his music. The starting point is our Library for the Performing Arts John Cage Music Manuscript Collection; from there we want to bring the music alive through videos that encourage an exchange of ideas on not only how to perform Cage, but on the questions his work raises of what constitutes music, sound, art and more.

Finally, we're working on a web version of *Bibliion: World's Fair* tied to our Digital Gallery at nypl.org, and an NYPL app allowing users to manage their accounts and search our catalog online from mobile devices.

Deanna Lee is the Vice President for Communications the Library, responsible for promoting the Library and its mission, activities, and collections through publicity, marketing, digital and print publications, multimedia content, and design. She came to NYPL from the Asia Society, and before that worked 20 years in broadcast news--as a senior producer for *ABC's World News Tonight*, documentary producer, and overseas producer for Nightline.