Labyrinth: A Way In ... A Way Out

By Elaine Jayne and Judith Arnold

labyrinth, n., 1. an intricate combination of paths or passages in which it is difficult to find one's way or to reach the exit. 2. any confusingly intricate state of things or events; a bewildering complex

The decision had wide-ranging ramifications for students, staff, and faculty at WMU: a new Web-based library catalog was to be online by the beginning of the Fall Semester, 1998. Finder, the familiar text-based Libraries' online catalog, has been replaced by West*Cat*, an amazing tool that contributes to a rich information environment with embedded hypertext links that connect to other resources found in our collection and, in the future, to related resources on the Web. All of these resources are accessible at the click of a mouse. This makes the catalog a launching point; many paths to useful resources are available.

Traditionally, WMU's University 101 students have been introduced to the library and its catalog by completing a self-guided tutorial. The substitution of West*Cat* for Finder, as well as the inauguration of the Libraries' new home page, demanded significant content revisions to the original tutorial. After consideration, we concluded that a revision was not adequate; a new tutorial, also accessible on the Web, should be designed. As we thought about the goals of the tutorial, what it needed to accomplish, our eyes were caught by the sculpture found just outside of Waldo Library, "Standing Room Only," by Patrick Dougherty. Dougherty's vision seemed a perfect visual representation of the increasingly complex search for information, and we chose to reproduce the sculpture as the opening image for the new tutorial. The title *Labyrinth* seemed to combine perfectly the sculptural image, to suggest the confusion and bewilderment that students often experience as they try to find their way through a maze of information, and, ipso facto, to be the means to a way out of that confusing maze.

Labyrinth is designed to introduce students to the services of the University Libraries, and to help them learn basic searching techniques so that they are able to locate periodical articles, books, and other items located in the University Libraries. These goals mirror those set by Patricia Vander Meer and Margie Easter, whose HyperCard-based tutorial had served thousands of University 101 students since 1993. Each year, some 600 University 101 students completed a unit on using the University Libraries. It was composed of the tutorial and follow-up exercises designed to apply the principles and techniques contained in the self-study program that was mounted on five terminals in Waldo Library. Labyrinth adds the dimension of availability on the Web, a tremendous increase in accessibility, and utilizes the graphical and interactive hypertext linking features of the Web.

The tutorial, which has been available since the beginning of the Fall Semester, 1998, consists of three modules and a quiz. It is found on the University Libraries' home page, the fourth item on the main screen, Tutorials and Term Paper Helpers. Anyone with Internet access can type in the University Libraries' URL (http://www.wmich.edu/library/), and gain direct access to the main screen. Then it's a quick scroll down to Tutorials followed by a click on it that opens a screen with Labyrinth prominently featured; one more click opens the tutorial itself. In the University Libraries, non-dedicated terminals are automatically set on the Libraries' home page and four terminals have Labyrinth as their key display.

The opening unit of Labyrinth, a "Highlights Tour," introduces students to Waldo Library and the branch libraries, showing their location on a map of the campus and providing information about each library's collection, location, and hours. An online tour of Waldo Library takes students floor-by-floor through the building using floor maps and photographs to indicate important service points and locations such as book checkout, reference assistance, and current periodicals.

Following the tour is a second module that illustrates the basic steps of how to search for books using West*Cat*, the online Web-based catalog. This module focuses on searching by title and author, and on using the Guided Keyword search to find books on a topic. Reproductions of the West*Cat* screen and hypertext links are used to simulate the sequence of a search. Information about searching techniques and tips appears in notecard-like boxes surrounding the image. Users can click on terms that may be unfamiliar and be linked to definitions in an online glossary of terms.

The third section of the tutorial, "Searching for Articles," shows students how to identify an article on a topic in a general periodicals database in FirstSearch. Then, it demonstrates how to locate the issue of the periodical, in which the article appears, in the University Libraries by using the Journal Title search in West*Cat*. As in the "Searching for Books" module, screen captures of FirstSearch and West*Cat* are embedded with hypertext links to simulate the expe-rience of searching. Tips for interpreting database records are offered to help students learn what information is essential for locating and for judging the suitability of the source.

After completing the three modules, students take a multiple choice quiz that is randomly generated from four different versions. The questions test each student's knowledge of the important points of the tutorial modules, but include a few playful answers such as the following example: "Publications including magazines, journals, and newspapers are called: a) newsstands b) bird cage liners c) periodicals d) subject headings." University 101 students qualify for a certificate by successfully answering 11 or more of 15 questions, and must submit this certificate to their instructors as evidence of completing the tutorial.

Although the main purpose of Labyrinth is to introduce University 101 students to the library and basic searching techniques, the tutorial is also useful to many other user groups. Any undergraduate, graduate student, faculty, or staff member—both on and off-campus at the University's Regional Centers—may find Labyrinth valuable for self-guided instruction or to refresh skills. Since Labyrinth is on the Web, it can also be accessed by high school seniors who may be considering an application for admission to Western Michigan University, or planning a visit to the Libraries for a special assignment.

The development of the tutorial Labyrinth required the talents and hard work of several University staffers. Among these are Lisa Sisley-Blinn, who was responsible for web authoring and consulted on design and technical matters, and David Isaacson, who read the script and advised us on the content of the tutorial. Patricia Vander Meer's Criminal Justice Tutorial served as a model of a Web-based tutorial, and Jan Oliver at University Computing Services provided invaluable advice throughout the developmental stages. In creating the content for the tutorial, we tried, above all, to look at the University Libraries and its catalog and databases through the eyes of a new library user. Take a trip yourself, find a way in and out of the Labyrinth, and open the door to a world of information sources.

To access Labyrinth, type in its URL: http://www.wmich.edu/library/tutorial/main. html. If you are already on the Libraries' home page, scroll down to the heading Tutorials and Term Paper Helpers, click, and then click again on Labyrinth: University 101 Tutorial.