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Considering Games and Gamification in Libraries & Associated Entities — The “G” Word

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DISCLAIMER: *The following well-reasoned and executed column is written for gamification newbies and assumes the reader has not been issued an avatar, has yet to complete a quest and has a gamification recognition score of zero or less. Those among you who are already hip to gamification may nod in agreement, smile through gritted teeth, or take your level 12 library ranger on a quiet walk while this is being read. — JS*

A thoughtful reader asks, “Gamification is a hot buzzword in libraries these days. Games, gamification, shmamification: It’s all just playing games. Right?”

A short answer: Dare you even ask?

A bit longer answer: Author and game designer **Ralph Koster** defines a game as “a system of rules that, taken together, creates a simplified model of some aspect of reality.”¹ The game of Monopoly, chess, and Angry Birds simulate (in order) capitalism, strategic warfare, and hurling little birds at evil green pigs with a slingshot. Okay, so I used the term “reality” pretty loosely there. The point is that a game operates in its own self-contained environment and boundaries. “Gamification” is a bit different.

While researching for this column I came across an **ACRL** Tech Connect blog post by **Bohyun Kim**.² **Kim** gives insight into why a library should gamify, what to avoid, and how to harness the “power of game dynamics.” She justifies library gamification by explaining that “game dynamics can raise library users’ level of engagement with library resources, programs, and services. They can help library users to solve problems more effectively and quickly by making the process fun.”

The careful reader will note that she did not say anything about playing games in the library. No library game night here. **Kim** uses the “G” word: gamification. She also notes that “gamification is not just a hot topic in libraries or higher education. It is a much bigger society-wide trend.” So, librarians are at the bloody cutting edge of a society-wide trend of something. But, what?

Though the terms “games” and “gamification” are often used interchangeably, they do connote different concepts. The **ACRL** defines gamification as “the process of applying game-thinking and game dynamics, which make a game fun, to the non-game context in order to engage people and solve problems.”³ Thus, while a game operates in its own specifically defined, self-contained environment, gamification is a process that is applying game-like elements to a situation or activity.

I like to think of gamification in terms of what it can do: motivate. As I noted in my previous column, gamification is essentially the process of adding a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down⁴ and make an otherwise mundane activity palatable. But, far from making a task just more palatable, gamification incorporates an entire system of game elements that encourages and compels a user.

Why just get up early and run every morning, when you can get a virtual badge for racking up points for each completed mile and by passing a certain (virtual) goal post along the route? Use the same app to track your progress on a leaderboard with thousands of other runners. You get bragging rights *and* a badge. Are you not psyched to do this more often? You just took a normally mundane (and overly energetic) activity and added progress points, victory rewards, and friendly competition among fellow participants. You gamified your morning run.

How about gamifying your entire life? **Lindsay Cronk** is an award-winning librarian⁵ at the **University of Houston**. She contributes to the *LITA Blog* about the value of gamification, and she supplies a link to a site that literally gamifies your life. *Habitica*⁶ gives you “game mechanics (leveling up/hit points/rewards) to motivate you towards more productive and healthy behavior. You can build the structure of your app experience, creating your own set of dailies (daily tasks) and habits (good or bad which add or subtract points).”⁷ Talk about the “game of life”!

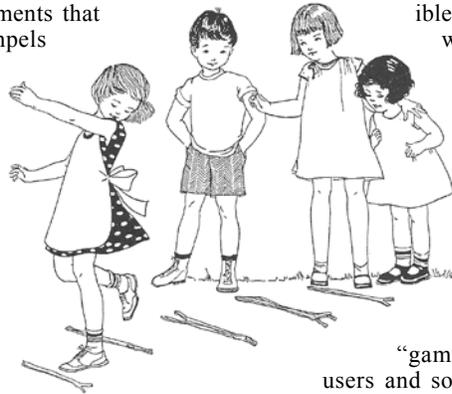
There is a gamification app for just about everything. Indeed, gamification has immersed the planet in a ubiquitous social “game think” in which any task or routine activity can be incentivized into a competition against yourself or millions of like-minded souls from across the globe. This has become a boon to advertisers who have latched onto gamification for marketing and for gathering customer data with gamified ads.⁸ Augmented reality technology has even given us the idea of capturing Pokemon characters who drop out of the air,⁹ offering an incredible potential to attract customers to places of business, museums, and even (gasp) libraries. All the world is a game. Indeed, as the **ACRL** Website puts it, “games have become portable activities interwoven with reality.”¹⁰

The incentivization power of this concept has not been lost on trainers and educators. Leaderboards and badges are now a regular thing in both corporate offices and in third grade classrooms. Game elements can be applied to any learning activity, and our digital technology makes tracking individual progress and status painless and invisible. There are even teachers who, using gamification elements and game motifs, have transformed entire courses into interactive, multiplayer games.¹⁰

Libraries are always looking for innovative ways to engage patrons, and **Kim’s** definition of gamification as using “game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” fits well into this mission. Academic libraries have applied gamification to student orientation and information literacy instruction. **Kyle Felker**, a digital initiatives librarian at **Grand Valley State University**, points out that “point scoring is one of the oldest game mechanics there is.” The library catalogs and library systems are full of numbers and data that can be used as the basis for all kinds of game elements. **Felker** notes that “this is the idea behind [the **Huddersfield University**] Lemon Tree game, which point-scores resource usage by department or discipline, mobilizing natural competitiveness to drive up resource usage.”¹¹ Also, “gamification doesn’t necessarily require complicated technology or huge investment.” **Kim** points out that one can “run a successful game in your library instruction class with a pencil and paper.”¹² It could even be as simple as awarding badges in a summer reading program.

In one of the more interesting applications of gamification, particularly involving librarians, **Lindsay Cronk** in another *LITA Blog* post talks about applying gamification to “pursuing promotion in an academic library or seeking professional development opportunities in the workplace.” “What if,” she asks, “we framed promotion as a mission for an epic win, with quests, battles, and rewards along the way?” She notes that “quests might include identifying and contacting collaborators ...for a research project” or getting published in an impressive journal. You would be inspired to complete quests toward “power-ups” (promotion) that “give you more professional clout and experience.”¹² Consider those virtual gold pieces you earn (to “buy” your avatar new wardrobe accessories) just a happy bonus.

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Clearly, gamification is far from simply game night at the library. While many of your patrons are playing board games, others are having their library experience enlivened by racking up points on the online catalog, getting badges for summer reading, and vying to be the patron with the highest number of librarians on their “friends” list. Who knows, perhaps the day will come when the number of books one checks out of the library will be at least as important as the number of “likes” received on a Facebook post. Okay, that is crazy talk, I know. But, what a wonderful virtual world that would be. 🌳

Endnotes

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In thinking about what song titles best exemplify the topic of creating a strong vendor/librarian relationship, the answer came immediately to me. *Get Together*, also known as *Let's Get Together*, is a song written in the mid-1960s by American singer-songwriter **Chet Powers**, also known as **Dino Valenti** performed by **Jesse Colin Young & The Youngbloods**. 🌳

Mike is currently the Managing Partner of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, “Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success” has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com



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