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Considering Games in Libraries and Such — The Ultimate Library Instruction

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Column Editor's Note: *The following narrative represents a reenactment of a scenario game currently in the final production phase. Any relationship to actual learning is purely coincidental. — JS*

Students entering the library classroom showed immediate signs of confusion. The classroom lights were low, and a steady, mechanical hum was barely audible. Taking their seats, they noticed a projected screen at either end of the classroom. The screen at the front of the classroom stated “Nuclear Core” in glowing letters with the international warning symbols of radiation on either side pulsating in bright yellow. The opposite screen glowed and swirled in eerie purple, blue eddies like a giant, rectangular lava lamp.

But, that was not the weird thing. The weird thing was sitting on a table in the middle of the room. It was a series of three, 10-inch-high, lighted metallic tubes arranged in a semicircle base. Each tube had a glowing section at the bottom and a small red blinking light emanating from the top.

One student turned to her classmate and asked if she was in the right classroom. “This was that library class, right?” Other students nodded with looks of uncertainty.

Then the librarian instructor entered the room wearing a lab coat and a worried expression. “Comrades,” he announced in a tone that matched his concerned expression, “I have grave news. The nuclear plant that supplies power to our facility has gone into the initial stages of meltdown. Let me draw your attention to the temperature gage.” All heads turned to a graphic image of a large round thermometer on the rear screen. The needle hovered at 415 degrees.

The librarian spoke gravely. “This gauge will keep track of the rising temperature. Unfortunately, when the temperature red-lines, the CORE will explode.”

The librarian now had the full, rapt attention of the students, who were starting to look at each other with a combination of curious grins and incredulous looks. What the heck was he talking about? Surely, this was not the scheduled library class they were supposed to be in.

“Of course, we must do our best to hack into the CORE and shut this process down within the next 30 minutes. If we are unable to stop it within 30 minutes we will not survive. We will in effect be reduced to radioactive slag.”

The students stared, unblinking. What?

“So, please listen carefully,” the instructor said as he walked among the tables in the classroom.

“To better focus our efforts and increase our chance of success, we shall separate into teams. Each team will each try to get to the CORE to shut it down. Each of you has a team designation with an assigned table / computer station. Please assemble into your respective teams at your designated stations and follow the instructions there.”

As the students assembled, they noticed a sealed envelope on the keyboard of their team computer that read “open immediately.” The instructions led them to an application that bade them answer questions or solve problems based on search results from the *Web of Science* database.

“Oh, I know what this is,” a student said aloud to no one in particular. “We’re doing database searching... It’s just a game.” Other students nodded. A few barely stifled an eye-roll.

A warning buzzer sounded suddenly. The forward screen went black and then started to fade up. The students stared in silent bewilderment as an image of a disheveled man in a lab coat appeared on the forward screen. The image was difficult to make out because it flickered in and out of video and audio static. But, they were able to discern the man speaking frantically. “Our main controls have been compromised by an outside hacker and we are in high emergency mode.” The man looked around desperately. “We have about 30 minutes before everything goes south. We need a team to bail us out of this mess or...” The screen went dark.

For a few seconds there was silence as all eyes locked on the librarian at the front of the room.

“Don’t look at me,” said the instructor, his hands in the air. “Get your teams to that CORE!”

There was a scramble as five teams gathered around five tables. Each table had two computers that allowed each team access to the CORE and to the *Web of Science* database. Instructions were sparse, and each team had to discern what to do as they went. They soon figured out that they had to advance through several levels of the system to reach the CORE. Each level offered a series of problems or issues to solve with the database to break into the next level. When a level was breached, a team was presented with an animated graphic of metal blast doors opening into the next level.

Some students soon noticed that on the forward classroom screen a graphic of the

CORE levels seemed to be tracking each team’s progress. As a team passed into another level, an alarm sounded, and the graphic lit up with color indicating the team was one step closer to the CORE.

All latent eye rolling ceased, and an audible excitement filled the room. Now that each student realized that each team’s progress was visible to all, it no longer mattered why they were doing this. This was now a competition — a race to the CORE!

Warnings buzzed and lights flashed as the temperature gauge increased. Time was running out, and the teams had been slowed down by the necessity of interpreting clues generated by several printed out articles — actual print articles. They had been directed to an actual (i.e. real, analog) locked box in which they had found them. Solving this puzzle would give them the code to the main CORE control room. But, there were murmurings of discontent. “Like, who does *printed* articles these days!?”

Team three solved the puzzle that opened an animated door. The students literally screamed in excitement that quickly died as they realized what they had. The opening door revealed a cipher and a clue for shutting down each of the glowing tube things in the middle of the room. Apparently, these were the melting fuel rods, and all data gathered thus far in their database odyssey needed to combine with the cipher to obtain the three shut-down codes. An alarm indicated that three minutes remained until CORE meltdown. Apparently, they were still doomed.

The claxon began to sound and red lights began to flash as the other teams broke into the control room and converged on the middle table to coordinate their data. The temperature gauge was approaching critical. Team two solved their section of the code and typed it in. A fuel rod powered down with an audible descending groan. The red light on the rod stopped flashing and went green. Less than two minutes remained. Team one typed in their code. A claxon ceased, and the green light flashed on a second tube. As the last seconds ticked away, team three solved their puzzle and fumbled to type in the final code. But, alas.... The temperature gage clicked into critical mass and the final warning buzzer sounded. An image of an expanding cloud of steam and radioactive ash appeared on both screens with the audio of an increasing roar. All members of our nuclear teams disappeared in the swirling, burning mass. The lights went out.

For a moment there was dead silence. Then a student piped up, “That database thing was kind of cool. Can we do it again?”

Thus, learning was had with nary an observation of drying paint. 🍌