

# Unraveling the “Mystery” of the Library: A “Big Games” Approach to Library Orientation

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## Introduction

At colleges and universities everywhere, freshman orientation can be overwhelming to new students. They must move their belongings and leave their families, while being surrounded by strangers in a strange environment. Adding to the difficulties, freshmen often spend a weekend being exposed to a dizzying array of information about the campus. They must learn where their classes are, where to eat, how to access their e-mail, where important offices and recreational facilities are, and how to make responsible decisions.

Lycoming College is no different. As a liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania, it has approximately 1,400 students and is heavily residential. Each year, approximately four hundred first-time students arrive on campus three days before the semester begins. During the first weekend, students participate in orientation activities across campus. As part of this campus orientation, new students come to the John G. Snowden Memorial Library in groups of sixteen to thirty-five over a period of five hours, with a new group arriving every ten minutes. These groups are based on residence hall floor, and the groups stay together for most orientation activities. Each group is scheduled to spend approximately twenty-five minutes in the library.

Because of potential information overload and time constraints, the library has kept the goals of its

orientation simple: bring students into the library, move students onto each of the library’s four floors, and encourage students to meet as many of the library staff as possible. For a number of years, the library had conducted an orientation program where students worked in pairs to complete an eight-page activity and information booklet that led them throughout the library. This method of orientation was very informative, but not very interesting. Two years ago, the librarians were ready to try something new—something more engaging. They turned to games as a way to breathe new life into freshman library orientation.

## Literature Review

There is surprisingly little in the library literature that specifically focuses on freshman orientation. A 1995 LOEX survey found that a majority of respondents believe that library tours are the least effective way to teach,<sup>1</sup> but it is the predominant method of introducing students to the library.<sup>2</sup> There are few examples of alternatives for orientations, making it difficult to break out of the tour mode, even when motivated to do so.

One of the few specific examples is that of Kasbohm, Schoen, and Dubaj, who developed a library mystery tour that was a component of Niagara University’s mandatory first-year experience.<sup>3</sup> The objectives of the mystery tour were to familiarize stu-

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dents with the library's layout, to inform students of the library's services, and to introduce students to the library's resources. Students worked in groups of four, with each team member responsible for a different aspect of solving the mystery. One student was responsible for recording clues, one was in charge of using a library map, one recorded the solutions, and one was responsible for using technologies where needed.

Burrow, Marsh, Franklin, and Wallace discuss the need for a separate orientation outside of the bibliographic instruction program at Claremont Colleges.<sup>4</sup> In the orientation, students could learn some of the general physical locations before coming to a class that usually focused on a particular assignment. Furthermore, they felt it was difficult to physically orient students to the library while being confined to a classroom. They designed a voluntary orientation of their campus's libraries in which students would get a passport stamped after the completion of each activity. The activity was followed by a party where participating students were eligible to win prizes like Palm Pilots and ski lift passes. Despite the prizes, more students participated in the orientation when it was required for class.

Marcus and Beck of the Queensborough Community College (part of the City University of New York) library found some success with a self-guided tour in which students would assemble clues to solve a mystery.<sup>5</sup> Their treasure hunt model relied on intrinsic motivation; the only extrinsic motivation was a "Certificate of Library Qualification."<sup>6</sup> They felt that contact with the library staff reduced students' library anxiety and that the treasure hunt model presented the library in a less formal way. They called for experimentation and creativity in orientation design. However, Sciammarella and Fernandes reported that within a few years the Queensborough Community College library had reverted to a more traditional self-guided tour with a twenty-eight-page booklet students were required to complete.<sup>7</sup>

Donald describes an alternate reality game (ARG) he created for his library.<sup>8</sup> The invitation to participate was sent by e-mail, including a link to a brief video stating that a priceless artifact had been stolen from a library display. Suspects included library staff and residential assistants. The game combined real-world people and places with online activities to identify the thief. The staff developed a scoring system and post-

ed scores publicly. The prize was an all-expense-paid study break for the top two groups.

Penn State University Libraries developed a unique approach to library orientation; their Open House focused on "students' affective feelings about using the library" by hosting a luau in the library.<sup>9</sup> The two-day orientation catered to "fun, play, and personal interaction" to reduce library anxiety.<sup>10</sup> The Open House consisted of a self-guided tour and included multiple libraries across campus. Rather than being a part of new student orientation period, this activity took place a few weeks into the fall semester. In designing orientation activities, Penn State Libraries have "consciously avoided formal instructional activities, such as demonstrations of any databases or the library catalog."<sup>11</sup> This approach is likely entertaining for students, but some academic libraries might not be willing to forgo content in this way.

Eckenrode describes orientation activities in the context of a regular bibliographic instruction class.<sup>12</sup> The class was designed to resemble the popular reality show *The Amazing Race*. Four groups competed to be the first to go to five locations within the library and complete meaningful activities. The students were even interviewed by a hostess about fictional romance and team rivalries. The entire class was filmed.

While there is little literature specific to freshman orientation activities, there is a growing body of literature and conference presentations on game-based learning and "big games" or "pervasive games." Big games require participants to use their physical environments as a game board where they solve puzzles and perform tasks to reach a conclusion. They often use technology such as mobile phones, cameras, and GPS devices to augment their physical reality.

Good games have a number of qualities that lend themselves to learning. Games create intrinsic motivation because players are emotionally involved.<sup>13</sup> When students are interested in the activity, they do not require prizes or grades to participate. Games include frequent and immediate feedback that players can use as they progress towards the conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Games are interactive and allow students to be in control of their learning.<sup>15</sup> As Edery and Mollick explain, "Games are compelling because, at their best, they represent the very essence of what drives people to think, to cooperate, and to create. Learning is not 'work' in the context of a game—it is puzzle-solving, exploration, & experimentation."<sup>16</sup>

## Design

Combining the basic tenets of educational game design with a desire to make our freshman library orientation more engaging, we set out to create an orientation that would combine games, puzzles, and physical locations. We began the process of game design by listing the three goals of the library orientation: to bring students into the library, to move students onto each of the library’s four floors, and to encourage students to meet as many of the library staff as possible. We also had specific skills we wanted the students to learn, such as how to: locate a book in the online catalog and on the shelf, find the reference desk, meet each of the reference librarians, and find a print journal. These basic goals and activities were used as the scaffold for the orientation.

We next considered the parameters within which we would have to work. Constraints included the volume of students, their staggered arrival times, a limit of only twenty-five minutes in the library, no guarantee that students would have cameras or cell phones with them, limited funds for prizes, and the lack of a course grade for motivation. With approximately four hundred students to move through orientation, having them work in pairs in a game would have been logistically overwhelming for us to design; conversely, having groups that were too large would enable some students to be passive participants. We decided to have the students work in groups of approximately four and provided suggestions for what role each player could take within the group. One group member was in charge of reading and following the clues, one was in charge of navigating the library by using a printed library map, one was responsible for recording the team’s progress, and one was in charge of the transparencies, which will be described in detail later.

Because of the staggered arrival times (with a new group coming every ten minutes), we could not make the game competitive if the goal was to finish first. Therefore, all students who completed the activity would receive a small reward of a cool pop and a goody bag. We decided not to use technologies such as cell phones or cameras, and instead stuck to the physical library and a brief review activity on the library’s Web site. Finally, without prizes, the game needed to be motivating by itself, providing a sense of accomplishment that would satisfy students.

We brainstormed activities based on our simple goals. We found some inspiration in the Come Out

and Play Festival Web site, which describes games hosted at previous years’ festivals. The most inspiring was a 2009 game called *Ran Some, Ransom* designed by Burke and Maharas.<sup>17</sup> Players were given a set of transparencies with outlines of views in Times Square. When they lined up the transparency with the real world, letters on billboards and storefronts were highlighted by the transparency. Players could then use the letters to fill in a ransom note. The completed note gave the location of a picture of the ransom hostage. Players then proved that they found the hostage by taking a cell phone picture of it and e-mailing it to the organizers.

*Ran Some, Ransom* made a perfect backbone for our orientation. Having a kidnapping mystery rather than a murder mystery kept the activity light and humorous. Using the transparencies as a low-technology way to augment reality and highlight locations in the library kept the orientation game-like. The ransom note allowed students to assemble their clues in one place and track their progress. Using an image of the hostage rather than a live hostage allowed the hostage to stay hidden throughout the day. Burke and Maharas’s game suited our needs perfectly, we just had to make it our own.

The first step was to find a meaningful hostage for the kidnapping, which was surprisingly difficult. The first suggestion was the library mascot, a snowman. However, if the snowman was a kidnapping victim, he could not be greeting freshmen. Eventually, someone suggested the unofficial campus mascot, the Lyco Dog. The Lyco Dog is a border collie owned and trained as a therapy dog by one of our English professors. The dog attends home football games and retrieves the tee after kick-off. The librarians decided that the dog had several advantages. Most students could quickly develop an attachment to him. Also, once the dog (or at least a picture of him) was found, there could be a message inviting students to the first home football game of the season, thus tying into a campus social activity. Finally, we could just take an image of the Lyco Dog to include in the activity without having him participate the day of the orientation; seeing a picture or video was sufficient motivation for most students, without the logistical difficulty of keeping a dog hidden in the library all day.

The fact that our goals were so simple granted us a good deal of flexibility as we balanced “substance and sport.”<sup>18</sup> We mixed traditional activities, such as find-

ing a book or print journal issue, with creative ways to get students to identify locations. For example, clues led players to a meeting room where they watched a short video of the library director giving one of the letter clues. We wanted students to meet each of the reference librarians, so the librarians wore t-shirts that included letter clues in their names. We wanted students to be aware of the availability of the Academic Resource Center, the Leisure Reading Collection, and the vending machines, so we required them to line up transparencies with these locations to reveal additional letter clues.

The next step in the development process was to figure out how to avoid having large numbers of students in the same place at the same time. We created eight tracks, assigning each one a color. We then mapped each track so that groups started in different locations and collected clues in different orders. We were able to direct the groups so that they did not have to climb up and down more stairs than necessary.

Once the tracks and activities were outlined, we began posting each track's instructions on brightly colored paper around the library—on walls, on journal volumes, and on books. We tested the game with several staff members individually, then with our summer student employees, and finally with a large group of sophomore football players who had arrived to campus early for football camp. We discovered problems in each round of testing and got invaluable feedback. Testing is an absolutely crucial part of game design, as even minor errors can easily ruin the entire game.

### Implementation

Upon entering the library for orientation, students were informed of the shocking news – the Lyco Dog was being held hostage in the library and it was their job to find him. Each group was given a manila envelope with game materials. In the envelope were the team's directions, a blank ransom note, a map of the library, and three transparencies. After being given verbal instructions, teams scattered to their respective starting locations. Students were led through the orientation's activities by a combination of direction sheets included in their packets as well as clues posted on walls and on library materials located all over the building. Tasks involved in solving the case included:

- Lining up transparencies with the physical library: We took photographs of three loca-

tions in the library and used Adobe Illustrator to turn the images into cartoon outlines of the locations. The images were printed on clear transparencies. One team member would stand within a designated area marked by masking tape on the floor, hold the transparency up to eye-level, and line up the transparency outline to the actual location. There was a circle on each transparency that would outline a letter in that area; this letter was one of the clues needed for the ransom note.

- Locating a specific volume of a journal: Each team was given a specific volume of a journal to locate. The volume was covered in colored paper matching the team's instructions, and a letter clue and instructions for the next step or location were printed on the spine of the journal volume.
- Locating a specific book: Each team was given a specific book title to locate. Students had to find the call number using the online catalog and then locate the book on the shelf. The book was covered in colored paper to correspond with the team. A letter clue and instructions for the next step or location were printed on the spine of the book.
- Locating the reference desk: Students had to use a map of library to find the reference desk, where they received their next letter and clue.
- Putting a set of books into correct call number order: For each team, we had four books wrapped in colored paper corresponding to the team. Teams had to put the books into correct Library of Congress call number order, and then they were instructed to look inside the first book to find the next letter and clue.
- Finding the reference librarians: The three reference librarians wore matching t-shirts. The shirts had a picture of the Lyco Dog on the back, and on the front was a paw print nametag that contained a letter clue.
- Watching a video message: There was a thirty-second video clip recorded onto a DVD (set on continuous loop) of the library director informing students of the purposes of the collaborative study room where the video was playing. Within the clip, students were given another letter clue.

The activities revolved around the theme of espionage and crime as much as possible. For example, students were asked to locate library materials such as the book *Beyond Bond: Spies in Fiction and Film* by Wesley A. Britton and the journal *Crime and Delinquency*. The final location of the Lyco Dog was the criminal justice Subject Links page on the library's Web site. Having the final clue within the Web site allowed us to create a brief activity using Adobe Flash that required students to match services or collections to their corresponding floors, so that participants could review what they had learned before "unlocking" the dog.

### Reflection

Once the first implementation of this orientation activity was completed, we stood back to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses. We also consulted with the College's Student Orientation Staff, a group of upper-class students who attend and assist with the first weekend's activities. After gathering feedback on the activity, we made some changes to the game. We then retested the new design with multiple staff members and another group of student athletes prior to the second year of the orientation.

We were surprised at how few problems were revealed in the first year of the orientation. Most problems were minor; a few teams tried to hide the DVD, and one team hid the marked bound journal so that other teams would not be able to solve the mystery. These were easily remedied during the second year by stationing one library staff member near the DVD player and having other staff members patrol that floor more frequently.

The most substantial problem we discovered was that a few teams cheated. In some cases teams gave each other letters, and in other cases teams were able to guess the contents of the ransom note. To address these issues, additional proofs of completion were added to the second implementation to hold groups more accountable for the orientation's individual activities and to ensure that the orientation's goals were achieved. In the second implementation, groups collected the letters on a worksheet that allowed them to see how many more letters they needed, but the letters were not in order, eliminating students' abilities to guess the final message. Once the teams had collected all of the letters, they were then given the ransom note to fill in. They were also required to collect two paper dog bones from two staff members along the way. This

proved they were at these two physical locations and did not just get the answer from other students. These simple changes eliminated the obvious cheating.

### Conclusion

This fun, stress-free approach to library orientation was a hit with the students. While there was some initial eye-rolling as students began the game, they left the library smiling. Upper-class student staff who observed this game-based approach provided a great deal of positive feedback about how much fun the freshmen had while learning about the important places, collections, and staff members within the library. The freshmen became familiar with the physical layout of the library, with the basic services offered, and with the helpful library staff. This fun atmosphere lifted the library orientation out of the student-perceived drudgery of an already overwhelming first weekend.

Game development and implementation require a great deal of creativity and organization. To keep students motivated, the game must be fun, but it also must be well-organized or it could be more frustrating than enjoyable. Game development is substantially more work than a traditional fill-in-the-blanks-booklet orientation, but the pay-off for a game-based orientation well done is worth the effort.

### Notes

1. Linda Shirato and Joseph Badics, "Library Instruction in the 1990s: A Comparison with Trends in Two Earlier LOEX Surveys," *Research Strategies* 15, no. 4 (1997): 234.
2. *Ibid.*, 230.
3. Kristine E. Kasbohm, David Schoen, and Michelle Dubaj, "Launching the Library Mystery Tour: A Library Component for the 'First-Year Experience,'" *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, no. 2 (2006): 35-46.
4. Gale Burrow, Carrie Marsh, Kimberly Franklin, and Amy Wallace, "Reaching Out to First-Year Students: The Passport to the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges Orientation," In *Integrating Information Literacy into the College Experience*, eds. Julia K. Nims, Randal Baier, Rita Bullard and Eric Owen (Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian Press, 2003), 131-140.
5. Sandra Marcus and Sheila Beck, "A Library Adventure: Comparing a Treasure Hunt with a Traditional Freshman Orientation Tour," *College & Research Libraries* 64, no. 1 (2003): 23-44.
6. *Ibid.*, 43.
7. Susan Sciammarella and Maria Isabel Fernandes, "Getting Back to Basics: A Student Library Orientation

Tour,” *Community & Junior College Libraries* 14, no. 2 (2007): 89-101.

8. Jeremy Donald, “The ‘Blood on the Stacks’ ARG: Immersive Marketing Meets Library New Student Orientation,” In *Gaming in Academic Libraries: Collections, Marketing, and Information Literacy*, eds. Amy Harris and Scott E. Rice (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008), 189-211.

9. Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Rebecca Merritt Bichel, “A Luau in the Library? A New Model of Library Orientation,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 11, no. 1 (2004): 49.

10. Ibid., 50.

11. Ibid., 55.

12. Dawn Eckenrode, “An ‘Amazing Race’ through the Library: Reality Television Meets Problem-Based Learning,” In *Practical Pedagogy for Library Instructors: 17 Innovative Strategies to Improve Student Learning*, eds. Douglas Cook and Ryan L. Sittler (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008), 127-138.

13. James Paul Gee, “Learning and Games,” In *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 21-40.

14. Jeffrey R. Young, “5 Teaching Tips for Professors—from Video Games,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 56, no. 20 (2010): A15.

15. Waelchli, Paul. “Leveling Up: Increasing Information Literacy through Videogame Strategies.” In *Gaming in Academic Libraries: Collections, Marketing, and Information Literacy*, eds. Amy Harris and Scott E. Rice (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008), 212-228.

16. David Edery and Ethan Mollick, *Changing the Game: How Video Games are Transforming the Future of Business* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2008), 4-5.

17. Erik Burke and Lynn Maharas, “Ran Some, Ransom,” *Come Out and Play Festival*, [http://www.comeoutandplay.org/2009\\_ransomeransom.php](http://www.comeoutandplay.org/2009_ransomeransom.php) (accessed 3 Jan. 2010).

18. Jeffrey R. Young, “5 Teaching Tips for Professors—from Video Games,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 56, no. 20 (2010): A15.

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