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The 'Blood on the Stacks' ARG: Immersive Marketing Meets Library New Student Orientation

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Introduction

What is the single best thing you can teach new users about your library? Who are the most powerful trendsetters of library use? When the staff at the Coates Library at Trinity University asked themselves that question, we found that our best answer was this: students who serve as residential life staff have an enormous influence on new student behavior; ask *them* to teach new users to feel comfortable in the library and to be aware of its resources. Comfortable people ask questions, experiment with new tools, and promote those behaviors in others.

The goal of promoting comfort with campus places, people, and behaviors was also shared by another powerful and highly relevant community: the New Student Orientation planning team at the office of Campus and Community Involvement, the people who run the campus-wide orientation for new students. To update, expand, and improve our traditional library scavenger hunt orientation while capitalizing on the success enjoyed by the New Student Orientation team throughout the rest of campus, the librarians of Trinity University adapted the model of the alternate reality game to create a dynamic multi-media library orientation.

Background

Trinity University is a private university in San Antonio, Texas, with 2,467 full time undergraduate students in the 2006-2007 school year. There were 656 new first-year students in the fall of 2006, 70% of whom were from Texas. Residence is required for three years. The Coates Library plays a central role in the daily lives of students, with a popular coffee shop and 140 general use computers spread over two floors. Despite the popularity of the space, anecdotal evidence from library instructors working with senior seminars suggested that many experienced students were not well-acquainted with library services and resources. While the arrival of a new information literacy coordinator in 2003 resulted in a substantial increase in the number of library instruction classes taught to lower-division students, the librarians saw the library orientation as a valuable opportunity to start new students on the path towards engaged patronage of the library.

Moving from a high-energy scavenger hunt model which had used popular movies as themes for an intensive orientation to the major collection locations and service points, the librarians took up the University Librarian's charge to adopt a mystery tour model incorporating digital media and non-librarians as participants. A committee comprised of two librarians and a member of the teaching faculty with a specialty in online gaming was formed. The theme of ancient Egypt was chosen, and the member of the teaching faculty suggested the alternate reality game as a model for the orientation.

What is an ARG?

According to CNET, an alternate reality game is a "young medium…that blends real-life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, video games and online community and may, incidentally, be one of the most powerful guerrilla marketing mechanisms ever

invented." [1] The distinctive characteristic of an ARG is the blurring of the distinction between the game and reality, such that elements of the game world and those of the real world overlap. Fictional events may involve real world people and places; players meet in real time, under instructions from game characters who communicate by email and cell phone; clues may appear in newspapers, on television, or movie posters. The extent to which an ARG's status as a game is evident in the game's content varies. The lack of self-identification as a game is referred to as This Is Not a Game, or TINAG. A recent trend in ARGs has been to downplay this element of ARGs, with many games openly announcing their status as a game, the rules, and the locations of initial clues. [2] (reference whitepaper). ARGs also typically emphasize independent online work moreso than the social elements that characterize the genre

Academic libraries, Gaming, and Orientations

The use of games per se as platforms for library orientations is only recently being discussed in the professional literature, though the literature on library orientations in general is plentiful.[3] In seeking evidence of game- and mystery-based orientations, especially those that combine the elements of marketing with goals related to raising patron comfort levels, a number of examples emerge. Real-time treasure/scavenger hunts and themed activity-centered events, and online games with varying amounts of real-world interaction comprise the examples discussed below.

Marcus & Beck reinforce Mosley's assertion that orientation tours raise the comfort level of new students in the library.[4] They found that students completing a self-guided treasure hunt-based orientation had higher satisfaction ratings regarding the library resources and staff than students who completed a traditional library tour. Students completing the self-guided treasure hunt also scored slightly better on a post-test designed to test their knowledge of library resources than the control group.[5] A mystery tour was used to introduce first-year students to the library as a "first step in a continuum of information literacy instruction for undergraduates" at the Niagara University Library. [6] The Brill Science Library at Miami University found that a large majority of attendees of a themed orientation involving elements of information literacy and outreach reported feelings of comfort and understanding with library services, and indicated they knew whom to contact for research help.[7] An online interactive game called Head Hunt: The Game went live in Summer 2007. Designed to orient new first year to the OSU libraries before arriving on campus, the game uses a map of campus as a starting point for players to learn about libraries and play games and find clues in the process, ultimately using the clues to find the mystery location of the missing head of the OSU mascot.[8] In the fall of 2007, an alternate reality game called Help Me Solve a Mystery designed to teach information literacy and critical thinking skills was launched by educators at Western Washington University.[9]

While the literature has yet to discuss the implications of this trend in applying games to library orientation, information literacy instruction, and marketing efforts, the literature that is currently extant offers a positive appraisal of creative and fun-oriented efforts like those described above.

Campus Role Models

Our experience of past library orientations consistently underscored the powerful role of the Resident Mentors (RMs)—returning students who serve as paraprofessional student life staff and support small groups of new students throughout their first year on campus.[10] Informal observations made clear that when a resident mentor showed little or no enthusiasm for the library orientation, the members of her group were likely to have a negative response to the activities. Likewise, when an RM was actively engaged in the orientation as a leader and as a participant, the students in that group would have a positive first experience in the library and come away with a lasting impression of the library as a fun and helpful place.

There is ample evidence to suggest that upper-division students are dependable role models for new students. The discourse surrounding student learning communities highlights the role of undergraduate mentors in both residential and classroom contexts. Benjamin notes the high degree of satisfaction new students experienced with residential and classroom mentors of both genders in a study at Iowa State University, and reviews the theory of challenge and support which she suggests may explain students' experience of satisfaction with their peer mentors.[11] New students at PSU report their peer mentors have significant impacts on their level of comfort and success at the university.[12] At Trinity University, RMs are positioned to have maximum contact with new students, notably during New Student Orientation, a campus-wide, week-long series of programs and events designed to acclimate new arrivals to the campus community. [13]

Little of the literature surveyed discussed the role of upper-division and/or residential life-employed students in helping orienting new students to the library. Kuh and Gonyea, considering the potential of libraries to achieve campus-wide information literacy, emphasized collaboration with the rest of campus, including student affairs professionals.[14] A library peer mentor program at Utah State University which employed upper-division students to offer library services at the reference desk and in the classroom met with positive results.[15] Informal discussions of orientations with librarians from other institutions highlight the valuable contributions student library employees have made to orientation planning and preparation, and this has been true for past orientations at Trinity University.

Designing the Outcomes

To accomplish the goal of raising the comfort level of students in the library, the librarians involved began by convening focus groups of students, including first-year students, library work-study employees, and upper-division residence life staff and resident mentors. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify the most intimidating or conceptually challenging aspects of the library, in order to create a list of goals for the orientation. This led to a wide array of resources, skills, services, behaviors, and concepts that students considered a barrier to optimal library use and comfort.

Librarians and staff provided their own perspective by performing a review of current library usage trends. An early consideration was information from our website usage statistics, which indicated that our campus users were visiting the library website in high numbers both during operating hours and overnight while the building was closed. Usability studies had led to improvements in the design and content of the library website, and had also indicated a surprising level of challenge faced by all students in navigating the vast number of pages and resources included on the library's website. This led us to place a high degree of emphasis on orienting students to the library website as a 'library environment' on par with the physical space.

A second consideration had to do with social trends in library use. Many of our recent decisions in terms of designing and furnishing library spaces focused on supporting group work. Our Information Commons space is frequently the site of both planned and impromptu student collaboration, as are the soft seating areas throughout the building. Moreover, the anecdotal evidence reported by the public service librarians pointed to increased group work among students, impacting use of group study spaces and even the nature of reference desk transactions and research appointments. Yet our orientations had in the past focused on cultivating awareness of the physical layout of the building in individual new students. Though students had completed the scavenger hunt in small groups, the space to which we sought to orient them was intended for individual task completion rather than collective, collaborative effort.

Lastly, it was agreed that a library orientation was too brief and de-centered to accomplish any information literacy instruction. However, the orientation must remain consistent with the principles of information literacy and with the information literate behaviors the library promotes throughout the year. An initial idea for approaching this goal focused on encouraging new students to ask for help from library staff whenever possible, emphasizing the theme of the library as a place to ask and answer questions with information.

Designing the Delivery

"So far, this lessening of the TINAG experience seems to have had little or no negative effect on the games themselves, whilst greatly increasing the ease with which new players with no prior ARG experience can get into the game." P. 56
http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf
It should be stated here that the ARG model was the strongest influence on the design of Blood on the Stacks; it was not the goal of the librarians to create and deliver a fully-realized ARG, but rather to use the guidelines of ARG design to create a collaborative and immersive library experience across media, one that bridged new students' pre- and post-arrival experiences of the University. Our final product--by its second iteration in 2007--was a hybrid of an ARG, a self-guided mystery tour, an online multi-media game, and a treasure/scavenger hunt.

Outcomes

A satisfaction survey, combined with a survey of opinions about the library, was chosen to assess BOTS. Surveys were sent by email to first-year students and to Resident Mentors in the second half of the first semester, approximately two months after the event. In both cases, the sample sizes (42 first-years; 14 Resident Mentors) were too small for optimal results, though open-ended responses yielded helpful feedback.

First Year Students

In response to questions regarding the effectiveness of BOTS in orienting them to various locations in the library, first-year students responses were varied but trended positive overall. The highest indications of satisfaction were in response to the question asking about the effectiveness of BOTS in orienting them to service points like the Help Desk. 33% said the event was highly effective; 47.2% chose "somewhat effective"; 11.1% responded "minimally effective", and 8.3% said" not effective." The lowest number of positive responses was for the question asking them to rate the effectiveness of the orientation to the library's website and online tools, where 16.7% responded "highly effective" and 44.4% chose "somewhat effective." For this question, 33.3% responded "minimally effective" and 5.6% said "not effective".

The highest amount of negative responses was in response to a question on the effectiveness of BOTS in orienting students to library staff and to other library resources such as laptops and study rooms. 14.3% said the orientation to library staff was not effective (22.9% responded "minimally effective"); 13.9% responded "not effective" in rating the effectiveness of the orientation to "other library resources (19.4% said "minimally effective").

Responses to the opinion survey were positive, and included replies from both those who did and did not attend BOTS. When asked to agree or disagree to the statement "the library is a combination of great resources and friendly, helpful staff," 20% strongly agreed, and 46.6% agreed (22.2% were neutral). For the statement "the library is a place where I feel comfortable asking for help," 17.8% strongly agreed, and 42.3% agreed; 20% responded "neutral" and 8.9% disagreed. 24.4% strongly disagreed with the statement "the library is an intimidating place," 33.3% disagreed, 24.4% were neutral, and 6.7% agreed. 20% agreed that the library was a confusing place, while 31.1% disagreed and 11.1% strongly disagreed (26.7% were neutral). Responses from the small number of respondents who indicated that they did not attend the event did not deviate significantly from the trends of the majority, and represented a very small sample size (five respondents).

Open-ended responses to a question about how to improve the event in the future included requests for clearer instructions, complaints about the state of the building at the time of the orientation (vendors were still in the process of completing a shifting of the collection), and two requests to connect game locations in the library with collection content. One student asked that maps of the building be included, and another thought serving food would be a good idea, echoing the recommendations of many of the authors cited above.

Resident Life Staff

Survey responses from RMs indicated some differences in appraisal from the first-years. Highest ratings came in response to a question about the effectiveness of BOTS in orienting new students to the library staff. 78.6% responded "highly effective." Lowest ratings were for the effectiveness of the orientations to other library resources (laptops, study rooms)—28.6% said "minimally effective"--and for orientation to the library's website and online tools—21.4% said minimally effective.

When asked about their own efforts to promote the library to new students, 92.9% said they promoted the library to the students in their group throughout the year. 85.6% said BOTS helped them promote the library to their students. When asked how the event changed their opinion of the library, 64.4% said BOTS made them more enthusiastic about introducing their RM group to the library, while 28.6% said BOTS did not change their opinion of the library and its staff. To the question "In your opinion, did BOTS fulfill its goal of making new students more comfortable with the library, its staff and its resources," 64.4% said yes, 21.4% replied maybe, and 14.3% sad no.

Narrative responses dwelt on the time of day (too early) for several of the RMs' scheduled slots to attend BOTS. Others echoed the students' survey responses regarding the amount of contact with library staff, and about the clarity of instructions as well.

Implications for Practice

The ARG model as applied to a library orientation for new students presents numerous opportunities for encouraging collaboration among participants, campus residential life staff and librarians, and for capitalizing on the influence Resident Mentors have as role models of student attitudes towards the library. It also provides planners of library orientations with a template for combining the most effective elements of the range of library orientation and promotion techniques discussed in the literature, especially mystery tours, scavenger hunts, themed orientations with prizes, and online multimedia games.

Notes

[1] http://www.news.com/Blurring-the-line-between-games-and-life/2100-1024_3-5590956.html

[2] IGDA Alternate Reality Games SIG, "2006 Alternate Reality Games White Paper," (International Game Developers Association 2006): 56 http://www.igda.org/arg/resources/IGDA-AlternateRealityGames-Whitepaper-2006.pdf

[3] Sandra Marcus and Sheila Beck, "A Library Adventure: Comparing a Treasure Hunt with a Traditional Freshman Orientation Tour," *College and Research Libraries* 64 (January 2003): 25.

[4] Sandra Marcus and Sheila Beck, "A Library Adventure: Comparing a Treasure Hunt with a Traditional Freshman Orientation Tour," *College and Research Libraries* 64 (January 2003): 26.

[5] Sandra Marcus and Sheila Beck, "A Library Adventure: Comparing a Treasure Hunt with a Traditional Freshman Orientation Tour," *College and Research Libraries* 64 (January 2003): 25.

[6] http://www.trinity.edu/departments/res_life/fy_area.htm

[7] Eric Resnis, Betsy Butler, and Jennifer Barth, "Follow the Silk Road to Orientation Success: Promoting Miami University's Brill Science Library," *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, (Summer 2007) :11-12.

[8] Nancy O'Hanlon, Karen Diaz, and Fred Roecker, "A Game-Based Multimedia Approach to Library Orientation," LOEX Conference, May 2007.

[9] Eric Resnis, Betsy Butler, and Jennifer Barth, "Follow the Silk Road to Orientation Success: Promoting Miami University's Brill Science Library," *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, (Summer 2007) :4-6.

[7] Kristine Kasbohm, David Shoen, and Michelle Dubaj, "Launching the Library Mystery Tour: A Library Component for the First-Year Experience," *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 13 (2006): 38

[5] http://researchquest.blogspot.com/2007/05/info-lit-alternate-reality-game.html

[10] Mimi Benjamin, "Satisfaction of Learning Community Participants with Residentially-Based and Residentially-and-Course-Based Learning Community Peer Mentors," http://www.lc.iastate.edu/SatisfactionWithPeerMentors.pdf

[12] Candyce Reynolds, "Undergraduate Students as Collaborators in Building Student Learning Communities," in *To Improve the Academy V. 22,* eds. Catharine Wehlburg and Sandra Chadwick-Blossey (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company 2004), 233

[13] http://www.trinity.edu/departments/student_activities/firstyear/What%20is%20Orientation.htm

[14] George Kuh and Robert Gonyea, "The Role of the Academic Library in Promoting Student Engagement in Learning," College & Research Libraries, 64 (July 2003) : 268

[15] Wendy Holliday and Cynthia Nordgren, "Extending the reach of librarians: Library peer mentor program at Utah State University," C&RL News (April 2005): 284