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If you build it...?

One campus' firsthand account of gamification in the academic library

Dress up the way you would for an interview. Take a photo of a friend with a roving reference student assistant. What exactly is the VPN, anyway? Stop by the table to get the secret code.

These simple tasks and questions are examples of the kinds of activities the University of California-Merced (UC-Merced) Library, along with several other affiliated groups encouraged participants to complete during our Welcome Week Campus Trek on the gaming app SCVNGR—an activity whose purpose was twofold: to introduce students to library and campus resources and to allow us to experiment with a new mobile gaming platform.

We envisioned groups of students bent reverently over their smart phones, awaiting the next directive and learning while they socialized. We purchased prizes and booked rooms. We carved and sculpted challenge directions until they were lithe, 140-character maxims. We posted a LibGuide. Finally, we assigned student assistants to test out everything to ensure it ran smoothly.

Then we waited for those groups of reverent, socializing students to materialize.

And waited.

UC-Merced wasn't the first of the UC campuses to experiment with SCVNGR. During the fall quarter of 2011, UC-San Diego (UCSD) launched their own trek that encompassed 15 challenges and required participants to roam all five of their libraries.¹ Students traveled at their leisure, learning about resources and trivia and earning points and knowledge along the way. After reading a report compiled by UCSD, the UC-Merced Library decided to

launch a similar experiment using the platform, in the hopes that we could potentially explore it for use in instruction in the future.

SCVNGR as a platform was attractive to us for several reasons, including UCSD's experience. First, it incorporated gaming into students' experience of the library, which has been widely explored and recommended as a way to engage library patrons.^{2,3} Second, it would enable us to connect with students early in the year without needing to commit personnel to lengthy tours and other scheduled services during a busy time.

SCVNGR conceptualizes itself as "the game layer on top of the world," and is free to download onto a smart phone, although in order to create challenges and treks, which are more organized groups of challenges, organizations and individuals need to pay. Once downloaded, users can find treks within a 25-mile radius and visit their locations, where they then complete challenges. Challenges on SCVNGR are short, fun activities—such as snapping a photo of a friend or answering a trivia question—that are completed for points.⁴

Keeping true to the goal of making things fun, SCVNGR challenges come in four distinct flavors: open response, specific text response, photo challenge, and QR code challenge. Open response challenges allow users to enter any kind of response they want, specific text responses only award points for the right

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information, photo challenges demand photos in particular places, and QR code challenges ask users to scan predetermined QR codes. Challenges can be viewed and completed via the SCVNGR smart phone app, which also tracks usage and the number of points accrued by each person or team. Our Welcome Week Trek used all four challenge types and asked students to work in teams of up to four, with one person—the team leader—in charge of (usually because he or she owned) the group's smart phone.

Although the library spearheaded the UC-Merced Campus Welcome Week Trek project, we decided to invite other campus groups to send us their input and contribute challenges to be included. Four other campus groups submitted challenges for the project: HEROES, which promotes student health; VOICES, a violence-prevention outreach group; Career Services Center; and Bright Success Center, which provides tutoring, workshops, and counseling aimed at increasing student success.

Overall, the trek consisted of 15 challenges, four from the library and three from all but one of the other campus groups. There were six photo challenges, six specific text response challenges, two QR code challenges, and one open response. Students were asked to work in groups of up to four—one team leader and three team members—and track their progress using one smart phone. We asked that they register on a Google form we embedded into our LibGuide⁵ so that we could track their progress and ensure that participants competing for prizes were actual members of our campus community. Once the trek was set, we planned a kickoff event to encourage student participation, and distributed advertising via library portals, campus Welcome Week booklet, and posters placed with student groups and residence areas.

Despite all this planning, discussion, and collaboration, our actual participation was very low: only a small handful teams registered for the trek during and after our kickoff event, and only three teams completed challenges during its span. Of the 67 students who attended our kickoff event, only 11 registered for the

trek, bringing our total of trek registrants to 18. Many students mentioned informally that they hadn't heard about the event, despite our vigorous promotion—posters in Residence Life, Facebook, and Twitter postings, outreach to leaders of campus groups—and a large number of the 67 students who attended the kickoff seemed motivated primarily by the prospect of free food.

So, what happened?

As we analyzed our data, including statistics on usage from the LibGuide, we realized several things: the first was that LibGuide usage was actually quite heavy, with 156 views on the trek page during the trek's duration. These views were spread out over the seven days the trek was open, indicating student interest in the project, and stood out in particular because there was no incentive to look at the LibGuide: we had compiled it, mainly, to share information about trek registration and procedures and answer questions students had over the course of the event. The views showed us that we should take the number of actual participants we drew with a grain of salt: someone was interested in what was happening, and they were looking at our pages of instructions fairly regularly.

The second thing we realized was that, in spite of the conversations we had, both in the library and with other campus group representatives, the fact remained that our launch date was the same as the first day of school. Students were faced with multiple competing events (and classes), as well as the stress of finding new classrooms and learning their way around campus. Additionally, due to campus scheduling this year, many new students had only moved in a few days before the start of school, and were immediately presented with a plethora of options, decisions, and activities to consider. Although we had hoped the energy and vitality of the first day of school might fuel student interest and participation, in retrospect, it was perhaps unsurprising that they were unable to book time to participate in an optional event, no matter how much fun we were able to make it.

Third, we recognized that our kickoff event's location—in a student lounge tucked deep in the crevices of our library building—might not have been an ideal launch pad. Although students frequent the cozy room (which is full of couches, long tables, and chairs, with windows looking out toward a field), they don't necessarily pass through on their way somewhere else. In short, we missed out on passersby who might have stopped to check us out and then stayed to sign up for the event.

Lastly, we wondered if the SCVNGR platform's reliance on smart phones might have made a difference to students. Although SCVNGR does include an option to participate via text message—and although UCSD's Trek included a paper alternative to the phone-based system—we did not explore that option during our trek, on the grounds that a paper version would prevent students from completing photo and QR challenges. It is possible, however, that participation might have been higher if we had been able to grant students easier access to this technology, since not all students on our campus use smart phones.

Most importantly, from our perspective, it was clear that there was interest in the project, even if the numbers of students were lower than we had hoped. The balance seemed to be in finding a way to use a mobile app in a way that appealed to students and drew them in without any grade-related incentive. For many students, it appears, the opportunity to win an iPod Shuffle was not incentive enough.

Overall, the trek taught us many valuable lessons about the “gamification” of the library, illustrating vividly both student interest in these kinds of projects, and how easily these events can be knocked off course by a variety of factors. Because games are voluntary and come with minimal incentive besides fun and desirability of the prize, it can be hard to hook a steady audience. Even people who are interested initially may be deterred by the reality of their new course loads and the information onslaught that, necessarily, if not ideally, meet incoming and returning students at our campus.

Despite our trek's low turnout, we are encouraged by the evident interest shown in the LibGuide, and have plans to pursue other opportunities to use SCVNGR specifically, and library gaming more generally, in the future.

Notes

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2. Bohyun Kim, “Harnessing the power of game dynamics: Why, how to, and how not to gamify the library experience,” *C&RL News* 71, no. 8 (September 2012).
3. Cheryl McCain, “Scavenger Hunt Assignments in Academic Libraries: Viewpoints versus Reality,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 14 no. 1 (2007).
4. “About Us,” SCVNGR Web site, <http://www.scvngr.com/about>.
5. “Home,” UC-Merced SCVNGR Trek Web site, <http://libguides.ucmercedlibrary.info/scvngr>.

Additional reading

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