

Jennifer Rosenstein

# Ghost hunters in the library

## Using an interactive mystery game for freshman library orientation

**P**ace University requires all first-year students to take a freshman seminar course called University 101 (UNV 101), and library orientation is a mandatory part of the course. The library used to provide in-person tours and orientations to each section of UNV 101. However, this has become impossible, as the size of the freshman class continues to grow. To address the problem, in Fall 2012 I created a mystery game to serve as the required freshman library orientation. The library mystery game used local history and university lore to introduce students to the library's physical layout, services, and online resources.

### Game development

Pace University has two campuses that serve undergraduate students, one in downtown Manhattan and one in suburban Westchester County. In previous years, the Instructional Services (IS) librarians on both campuses provided each section of UNV 101 with a library tour and a classroom-based orientation to online library resources. However, as the number of UNV 101 sections on the Manhattan campus grew, it was no longer feasible for each section to have an individual tour and orientation. We moved to an online video-based orientation, but some faculty members expressed a desire for students to physically visit the library.

At our IS team meeting in January 2012, we discussed the feedback on the online orientation, and I proposed a game-based orientation for the New York City campus. Work began on the game in the spring and

summer of 2012. The main goal of the orientation is to familiarize students with the library's physical and virtual spaces. After completing the game, students should:

- gain familiarity with the library's physical layout,
- understand the services available at different service points,
- become aware of library databases,
- understand how to find a book using the library catalog,
- understand how to find books in the stacks using LOC call numbers, and
- have positive interactions with library staff.

The mystery game was based on the legend that there is a ghost in the basement of one of the university buildings. I also wanted to ground the mystery in the history of lower Manhattan, where the university is located. The university archivist suggested Jacob Leisler as the ghost; Leisler was hanged for treason in 1691 right in front of where the university's main building now stands. She also suggested the Civil War draft riots as another historical event on which to base the game. Deciding to base the game on actual historical events also tied in to the university's plans for the first-year experience as a whole. For the fall 2012, instead of a common reading book, the university moved to an over-arching theme of justice,

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which would be explored throughout the first-year curriculum.

Two different versions of the game were created in order to cut down on potential cheating. Jacob Leisler would be the ghost for Game A, and the ghost for Game B would be a woman named Ann Derrickson. Mrs. Derrickson died during the Civil War Draft Riots after trying to protect her son from an angry mob. She lived not far from the university's present-day location, and the circumstances surrounding her death seemed likely to stir strong feelings of injustice.

The main difficulty in designing the game was to balance difficulty and accessibility. The game needed to be difficult enough to be challenging, but not so hard it would frustrate students. A draft version of Game A was ready for the IS team meeting in July 2012; the IS librarians played the game and offered feedback.

The main theme of the feedback was that the game needed to be more accessible and the clues needed to be more clear and straightforward. In response, options for help were built into the more difficult clues. In August 2012, a group of student orientation leaders tested both versions of the game. The feedback from this group was overwhelmingly positive. They found the game fun and particularly liked that it connected to the justice theme.

In order to assess students' opinions about the game, an online student survey was created. Students who completed the survey were entered into a raffle for prizes donated by local businesses, including gift cards for salon services, food, and school supplies.

### Game play

For both versions of the game students col-

lected the first clue at the circulation desk near the library's entrance. Game A started with a challenging clue using a coded message (see Fig. 1). When decoded, the clue lead students to the Collaborative Learning Room on the second floor. In the Collaborative Learning Room they received the second clue from the staff there. The first clue for Game B lead students to the microfilm drawers on the second floor, where they found another clue directing them to the Writing Center. In this manner, each clue lead students to a different location in the library. I tried to have a mix of straightforward clues and those that required a bit more work to solve. For example, in Game B when the

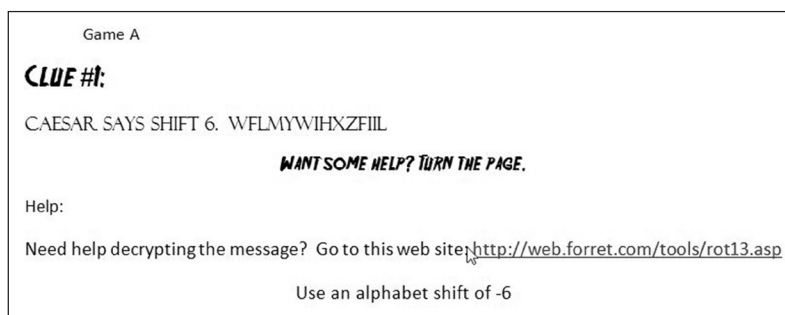


Fig. 1. One of the clues for Game A.

students went to the Collaborative Learning Room they received a sheet of paper with a word jumble. Solving the word jumble spelled out "Reference Books," and the clue specified a call number to find in the reference section.

Both games required students to visit the reference section and photocopy an entry from a reference book. For Game A, they received the entry on Jacob Leisler from Appleton's *Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. For Game B, they read the entry on the Draft Riots from the *Dictionary of American History*. In both games the clue found in the reference section included instructions to go to a Web site. For each game I created a fake blog that led to instructions for finding an article in a library database and a book in the library catalog. This was the most complex and time-consuming step of each game.<sup>1</sup>

Once the students found the book in the library catalog they needed to find the book upstairs in the library stacks, and the final clue for each game was on the shelf next to the book. The book for Game A was *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* by Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace. The final clue included a photocopy of the section from *Gotham* discussing Jacob Leisler. To finish the game students were instructed to answer the following questions: 1. Who is the ghost? Why was he hanged? 2. Do you think his death was just? Why or why not? For Game B the book was *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* by Barnett Schecter and the final clue included a copy of the description of Mrs. Derrickson's death. Game B players answered the following questions: 1. Who is the ghost? How did she die? 2. What do you think should be done to find justice for this woman and the other innocent people who were killed in the Draft Riots? Do we, as modern New Yorkers, have an obligation to remember tragic events in the city's history? To receive credit students needed to bring all the completed clues to the reference desk on the first floor in order to receive a certificate of completion. For most students it took 20-to-30 minutes to complete the game.

The game ran for six weeks during the middle of the fall semester. To promote the game, the coordinator of the UNV 101 program e-mailed flyers and reminders to all UNV 101 faculty and distributed paper flyers to the peer leaders—upperclassmen who work with each UNV 101 section. It was also important to communicate with library staff about their role in the game. All staff, especially the reference librarians, needed to be prepared to answer questions from students who might struggle with the game. A printed overview of each game was placed at the reference and second floor help desks.

While the game ran, constant restocking of the paper game clues throughout the

library was necessary. It became clear that many students were getting stuck in the same spot—the clue embedded in a fake blog online. Many students did not seem to find the corresponding help page for this clue. The link to the help page was made more obvious and an attempt was made to make the help page clearer. As students still seemed to struggle with this clue, I changed the help page to numbered, step-by-step instructions. However, many students still continued to need help with this stage of the game, and it seemed they were unwilling or unable to take the time to carefully read the instructions. It also became clear that many of the library staff were not sufficiently familiar with the game and not comfortable answering students' questions.

Despite these issues, the game went smoothly and the library staff was able to keep up with the number of students completing the game. The week before the end date of the game, the UNV 101 coordinator sent an e-mail to all UNV 101 faculty reminding them that the game was almost over. The final day of the game was the last day of classes before the Thanksgiving break. Despite this reminder, there were still several students trying to complete the game after Thanksgiving, and students continued to ask for the game for the next few weeks.

### **Game feedback**

Despite library orientation officially being a mandatory part of UNV 101, we have struggled to ensure all students complete it. UNV 101 is a pass/fail course and anecdotal evidence suggests students do not feel required to complete all the assignments. However, the response rate for the library mystery game was good. A total of 836 students out of the first-year class of 1,263 completed the game, giving a completion rate of 66 percent. As students completed the game they were asked to give their professor's name so we could track which sections were completing the game. Of the 57 UNV 101 faculty members only five did

not have any students complete the game, and five others had fewer than four of their students complete the game. This suggests that those professors did not assign the library game or assigned it but did not follow up with students.

One hundred and four students completed the survey, hopefully encouraged to do so by the chance to win prizes. The student survey responses suggest that the game was the right level of difficulty and the learning objectives of the game were met. Only 16 percent of respondents found the game too easy, while 20 percent found the game too hard. The most positive response was for the library staff. Eighty-three percent of respondents found the library staff friendly and helpful.

The respondents were about evenly split on whether or not the game was fun. Thirty-nine percent agreed with the statement “the game was fun,” while 41 percent disagreed. Of the 15 students who left specific comments, ten were positive. Students stated that it was a “good game and served its purpose of familiarizing students with the library and its services” and that the game was “interesting,” “very educational and helpful.” One student commented that the game was difficult for students with limited mobility as it required going between the library’s two floors more than once. The library does have an elevator for disabled patrons but library staff has to operate it.

There were also online surveys for library staff and UNV 101 faculty. Overall the response from the library staff was positive. Staff felt the game gave them more opportunities to interact with students, and they said some students seemed to enjoy the game. However, some staff felt they needed more preparation before the game, and were not comfortable answering students’ questions. In the future there will be training sessions for staff, and staff members will complete each game and experience all the clues themselves.

There was only one response to the faculty survey. This seems to be due to the fact the

survey was sent quite late in the semester when professors were likely occupied with final exams and grading.

## Conclusion

Overall, the game was a successful pilot program, especially given that the library had never tried anything similar. Student responses were mostly positive and suggest that the game accomplished our objectives of familiarizing students with many aspects of the library. The game also addresses the problem of wanting students to come to the library for an in-person orientation, but not having the staff or classroom space to see each UNV 101 section.

Next fall we plan to make the library orientation more of a step-by-step scavenger hunt instead of a mystery game. It seems that students are unlikely or unwilling to spend much time deciphering difficult clues, and less than half of survey respondents found the game fun. Survey results indicate the game structure is not particularly motivating for students. In order to get more student feedback, we will make completing the survey a required part of the game. To increase the number of students completing the game, we also want to make it more social and competitive.

We also need to address the problem of students continuing to request the game after the official end date. Possible solutions are to allow the game to run until the end of the semester, or post and send out more frequent reminders to UNV 101 instructors about the end date.

Overall, a library orientation game is a good solution to our staffing and classroom space constraints and seems to engage students more effectively than the traditional library orientation. With ongoing revision, the game will continue to be a valuable part of the first-year curriculum.

## Note

1. You can see an example of the clue at [http://followtheclues1691.blogspot.com/2012\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://followtheclues1691.blogspot.com/2012_05_01_archive.html). *ZZ*