Beyond the Book: Teaching Transliteracy through Transmedia Storytelling

Joelle Pitts, Daniel Ireton and Ben Ward, Kansas State University

In 2013, the Kansas State Book Network's Common Read program marked its fourth year by selecting Ernest Cline's dystopian novel *Ready Player One*. From the program's inception, Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL) participated in the Common Read program through activities such as hosting book displays, integrating elements of the books into face-to-face instruction sessions, and creating LibGuides. In addition to these activities, for 2013's Common Read two librarians and an instructional designer decided to try something previously attempted by only a handful of colleges and universities: build a campus-wide transmedia storytelling event that not only embedded literacy instruction into the heart of the Common Read program, but also captured the imaginations, interests, and talents of close to 600 students, faculty, and staff.

What is Transmedia Storytelling?

Transmedia storytelling is a relatively new term for a relatively unknown type of game. Also called "Alternate Reality Games," transmedia storytelling events use narratives to lead players through physical spaces and online environments to collaboratively solve problems (McGonigal, 2008). Although primarily used in commercial marketing over the last decade, many academics are taking notice and creating transmedia events on their campuses to facilitate student collaboration, critical thinking, and engagement (Salter, 2014).

The Power of Game-based Learning

The 2014 Horizon Report (a collaborative annual report highlighting the technologies that impact higher education in the short, mid, and long terms) states that game-like environments transform assignments into exciting challenges, reward students for dedication and efficiency, and offer a space for leaders to naturally emerge" (p. 42). But this report only states what many learning experts have known for decades – that games can motivate students to think critically, take calculated risks, and collaborate to ensure a transfer of knowledge is achieved. Salen (2007) summarizes the significance of this research for libraries in this way: "Beyond their value as entertainment media, games and game modification are currently key entry points for many young people into digital literacy, social communities, and tech-savvy identities" (p. 302).

The Objectives

The *Ready Player One* transmedia experience was designed to serve a three-fold purpose:

1. Connect students, particularly first-year students, with the campus culture and community, including events, offices, services, and resources
2. Connect students with each other and with faculty and staff
3. Cement the Libraries as the central hub of campus activity, research, culture, and learning

The designers embedded literacy instruction into every facet of the game. In addition to teaching them where to go and what is available, we sought to teach them how to use the myriad resources available to them.

Game Design

Outside of the Common Read, Kansas State University Libraries had previously launched a successful learning game titled "The Lost Book." Predicated on this success, the designers pounced on the *Ready Player One* narrative as an ideal vehicle to expand the experience beyond the Libraries into a truly robust campus-wide event. After nine months of weekly prep meetings, the game launched on the first day of the Fall 2013 semester, and we met several times per week throughout its seven week run to ensure things ran smoothly.

Mechanics

We incorporated a variety of mechanics meant to appeal to different types of players. To win, one had to be successful in all areas, but through these varied mechanics a diverse cross-section of campus could participate according to aptitude, time, and interest. Each game element resulted in a set number of points awarded to the player. These mechanics included:

- Attendance Experiences: Players had to be at a certain place at a certain time to receive points. These were often pre-existing events such as campus lectures, activity nights, and outreach events.
- Puzzle Challenges: Every day we posted puzzles and riddles related to the narrative and cultural references of the book to a LibGuide dedicated to the game. Some were relatively easy, but some required use of internet or library sources to solve.
- Classroom Projects: The design team worked with campus faculty and instructors in a variety of departments to embed game experiences into classes. Students who attended those classes were at a distinct advantage for those points, although all of the classroom projects were tied to a question solvable by anyone with the time and inclination.
- Cooperative/Collaborative Events: In order to build networks and camaraderie, many challenges and events were designed to incentivize players to come to events in groups or find other players to help them move forward on a particular task.
- Direct Book Tie-ins: We built several unique events around the major plot elements in *Ready Player One*. These events occurred at the same designated time and place each week, allowing a community of players to gather socially and network over the course of the game.

Transmedia Elements

We tied all of these mechanics together with several transmedia platforms: a bookmark packaged and delivered with a copy of *Ready Player One* during the summer's new student orientation, a digital scoreboard, a LibGuide, the campus newspaper, and two social media accounts.

The KSBN bookmark was the first "rabbit hole" into the game. A small icon of a purple Easter egg was included on the bookmark along with an invitation to "play along" and a URL leading to a countdown timer. The timer expired at midnight on the first day of classes, after which the scoreboard appeared.

The scoreboard was created through a partnership with the Computer and Information Science department on campus (described later). It reflected the design and mechanics of the scoreboard featured in the book and was a central element of the game. Each player logged into the scoreboard using their campus eID and password and entered the codes or answers they collected each day for individual challenges. These entries resulted in a synchronous high-scorer list that was open for the entire campus to see and follow. Players could use their K-State eID as their player handle or change their screen name to remain anonymous.

The LibGuide provided clues, hints, and puzzles for players. We used the LibGuide to post all game announcements, daily puzzles, and book-related materials housed in the Libraries. We purposely chose a LibGuide as the central communication hub of the game to encourage players to return to a library resource daily and to showcase the LibGuides system itself as a useful resource.

We partnered with our campus newspaper, the *Collegian*, to place clues in the form of advertisements regarding a "daily mystery point." Each clue led to a building, sculpture, or other campus location where a code was placed. To get the points for the day, players had to find the clue in the *Collegian*, find the location on campus, and then enter the code in the scoreboard.

The narrative elements of the game were primarily delivered through Twitter and Tumblr accounts. Along with a librarian authority figure tweeting from an account called @midnitlibrarian, we created a fictional first year student, dubbed "H" (a tie-in with the name of our main library building, Hale) who discovered the game through the bookmark over the summer. Clues and hints were subtly provided through these communications which helped build momentum throughout the weeks of the game. Players created their own accounts in these two platforms and interacted with H to get points.

Stakeholders

From the earliest point in the design process, we began to engage campus stakeholders to help us create and facilitate game elements. These partnerships were mutually beneficial: the design team saw increased support while the stakeholders experienced greater student and faculty awareness and patronage of their services and resources. These included, among others:

- College of Agriculture: Though not normally a highly engaged library partner, we worked closely with faculty to create several very popular game elements, including an animal skull match puzzle.
- Computer and Information Sciences Department: The instructors of a Web Interface Design course integrated the construction of the scoreboard prototype into the class's final assignment. We served as the mock "clients" to allow students to have a simulated design and project management experience. Instructor Nathan Bean then took the best elements from each student prototype to create a functional and elegant scoreboard that served as the centerpiece for the game.
- University Experience: We embedded game elements into all sections of the "University Experience" courses, a class that introduces approximately 500 first year students to college life enroll each year.
- English Department: We embedded game elements into courses that covered themes from the narrative, like the Hero's Journey.
- Administrative Units: We worked with several IT units to create the underlying technical structure of the game, in order to be able to use existing K-State student eIDs and passwords for players to authenticate into the scoreboard and collect points. In so doing, we developed partnerships with campus IT and our Office of Mediated Education.
- Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art: Located on the periphery of the campus, and of student awareness, the Beach Museum actively seeks for new ways to draw students and the community into their collections. We placed several large-point opportunities within the exhibits.

Transliteracy

Transliteracy is the "ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms and media" (Thomas, 2007, para. 3). Thomas' definition offers a unifying perspective on what it means to be literate in the 21st century – we have to learn how to communicate and contribute in whatever environment we are in. Fostering transliteracy was one of the more subtle goals (from the students' perspective) of this project. Although the main objectives of the game were to increase student awareness of and participation in campus culture, services, and resources, we also wove several literacy-learning opportunities into game elements and experiences. By virtue of completing game challenges and using game resources, players gained skills or increased literacy levels indirectly in a fun way. For example, by logging into the online scoreboard, players not only practiced authenticating using Kansas State University's eID system, they learned to navigate a brand new online platform in order to move forward in the game.

The chart on the next page represents the various literacies and skills embedded into game elements:

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Literacies and Skills

Game Element	Literacies/Skills
Online Scoreboard	Digital literacy, KSU security
LibGuide	Digital and information literacy, system
Newspaper clues	Media literacy
Art museum	Visual literacy
Social media (Twitter, Tumblr)	Social and media literacy
Location-based (GPS)	Geographical/location-based literacy
Direct communication (email, in-person)	Digital and verbal literacy
Banned Books Week reading	Oral literacy, public speaking skills
Commonplace book	Language literacy, personal reflection
Special events (e.g., High Ropes course)	Interpersonal/verbal skills

Challenges

An event of this magnitude is not without challenges. We experienced several technical problems with implementation and administration of the scoreboard and with a Flash-based simulation of one of the narrative elements in the story. The tremendous time investment required following the game's launch also came as a surprise. We each spent approximately 10 hours a week on the game and we still needed to recruit several staff and students to help with daily maintenance, placement of game elements, and administration of events and challenges. Additionally, one of most chaotic (yet all too common) challenges of transmedia events is the role of the players in shaping the trajectory of gameplay during implementation. Transmedia events are by nature collaborative, and the design team was required on several occasions to improvise game mechanics, events, timing, and other factors to meet our players where they were, cognitively, physically, and collectively.

Outcomes

Over the seven weeks of the game, nearly 600 participants took part in a variety of game challenges, events, and experiences:

- The game LibGuide received over 10,000 views
- Over 50 real-world events including a lecture by Margaret Wertheim, a TED lecturer
- Over 50 geo-cache sites including one on the nearby Konza nature trail
- Over 320 puzzles, riddles, and trivia challenges
- Over 500 social media posts and emails

The numbers alone indicated a significant investment of player time, talent, and energy, but a post-game player focus group revealed that players felt like the game was not only fun and informative, but also transformative. They indicated that they viewed their university experience in a different light after playing. They felt more connected to the campus and would be more likely to participate in other events and activities around campus. One player said, "I didn't realize that the [game] would kind of push me that much to do so many things that I usually wouldn't do, and just kind of think outside of the box." Another student described his very insular and focused degree program and how the game helped him to broaden his social group and refocus on a "bigger picture."

Increased visibility and integration of the Libraries into campus culture and event planning was another major outcome. The design team purposefully embedded the Libraries as the "heart" of the game, and led players back to library events, tools, resources, and staff repeatedly. Based on the focus groups and a player survey, more students, faculty, and staff (both among the player community and the stakeholder groups) now know more of what the Libraries offer and, more importantly, see the Libraries as a central hub in campus culture. Our winner proclaimed, "I know the library a lot better because of the game. I plan on spending a lot of time there." Also, over 70 reference transactions were recorded at our main library help desk, in addition to many more that were likely not identified as "game" questions or recorded as such.

Faculty and administrators (e.g., Head of the FYE Program, Head of the University Experience Program, Dean of the Library) also had positive experiences: all gave us appreciative thank-you comments about how collaborative the project was and about what the activity did for their program and the entire campus.

The facilitation of a game-based learning experience to engage players and the campus community resulted in an enriching and robust learning opportunity. While players were communicating and contributing to the experience using a variety of platforms and literacies, we were ultimately teaching them about our campus culture, systems, services, and resources, building a "campus literacy" that will help our students and staff navigate the wide range of opportunities and resources available to them while they attend or work for K-State. A similar game experience was created around the 2014 Common Read, and we plan on continuing to offer these successful storytelling events in the future.

References

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