A Scavenger Hunt vs. an ARG as a Library Orientation Activity

Kelly Giles, James Madison University

Abstract: This study compares two library orientation activities for freshman engineering majors, a scavenger hunt and a simple mystery-themed alternate reality game (ARG). Survey results indicated that students preferred the ARG, although both activities increased student confidence in their ability to perform library tasks.

Background

In 2010 I developed an activity modeled on alternate reality games (ARGs) to use as a library orientation assignment for freshman engineering majors at James Madison University (JMU). My goal was to encourage students to explore JMU's Rose Library and give them practice with basic library tasks. The ARG requires players to solve the mystery of a stolen book by following a trail of clues through the library and finally hacking into a RefWorks account belonging to the "thief" (Giles, 2015).

While my ARG is relatively simple, creating and maintaining the clues does require special effort on my part. I wondered if this additional effort resulted in a library orientation that was more engaging or effective than a more traditional activity, the scavenger hunt. A library scavenger hunt "comprises a list of questions that have no immediate relevance to course content" (McCain, 2007), and research indicates that scavenger hunts can be more effective than guided tours at familiarizing students with the library building and available resources (Marcus & Beck, 2003)

To test the ARG against a scavenger hunt, I created a set of worksheets covering the same tasks as the ARG, such as looking up the call number of a particular book. A library scavenger hunt can also include a fictional narrative and hidden clues, but this would have required planning comparable to that needed for the ARG. To minimize my preparation time, the scavenger hunt worksheets presented students with the tasks they were to complete in a straightforward manner without a narrative.

Methods

The participants in this study were students in a 100-level course required of all engineering majors. In the fall of 2012, two sections of the course were assigned the library ARG as homework. After completing the activity, students were asked to rate their familiarity with different tasks on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) as part of an online survey. They were also asked to provide feedback about the ARG. A third section that did not participate in an orientation activity served as a control group. The following semester, two sections of the course were assigned the scavenger hunt activity during instruction sessions held in Rose Library. One section received the survey on library tasks at the beginning of the session, before starting the scavenger hunt. The other section was surveyed after they had completed their scavenger hunt worksheets.

Findings

Survey results indicated that both activities were similarly effective at making students feel more confident in their ability to navigate the library and perform common library tasks (see Figure 1).
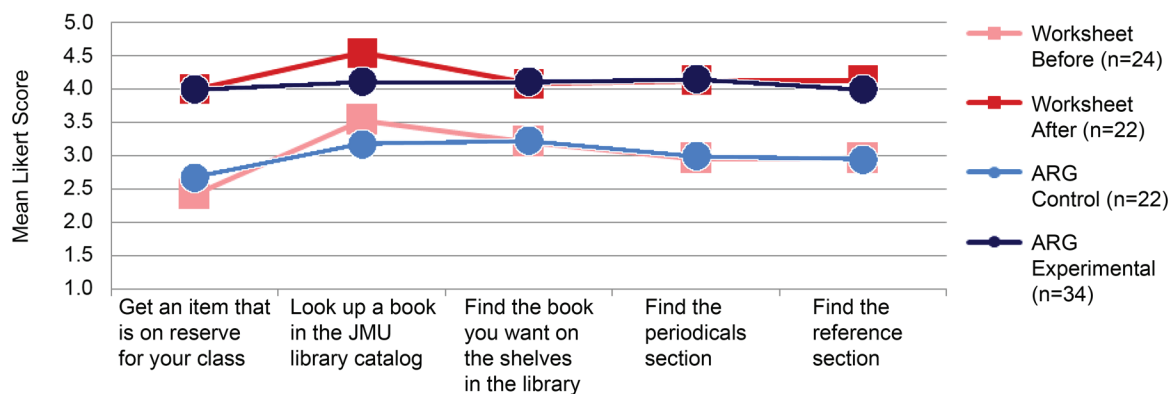

Figure 1: "Do you know how to perform the following tasks at Rose Library or online?"

Students who participated in the ARG were more likely to agree that their orientation activity was fun and helpful than those who participated in the scavenger hunt (see Figures 2 and 3). When asked if they would recommend that the activity be used with future classes, 79% of the ARG participants and 59% of scavenger hunt participants marked "Yes".
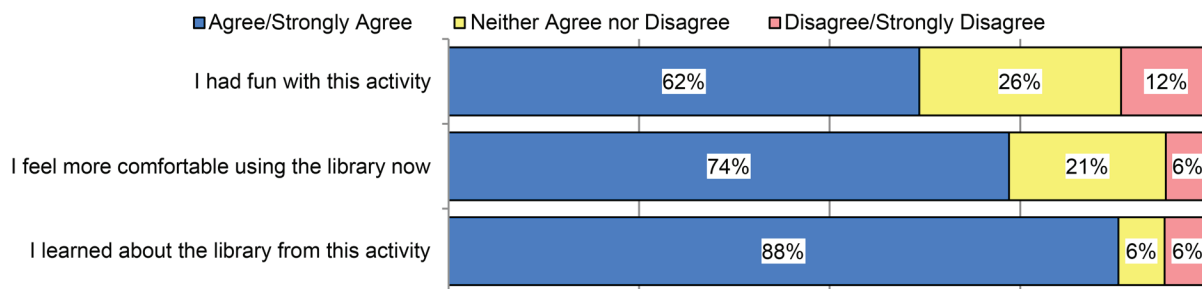
Figure 2: Student response to the ARG assignment, fall 2012 (n=34)
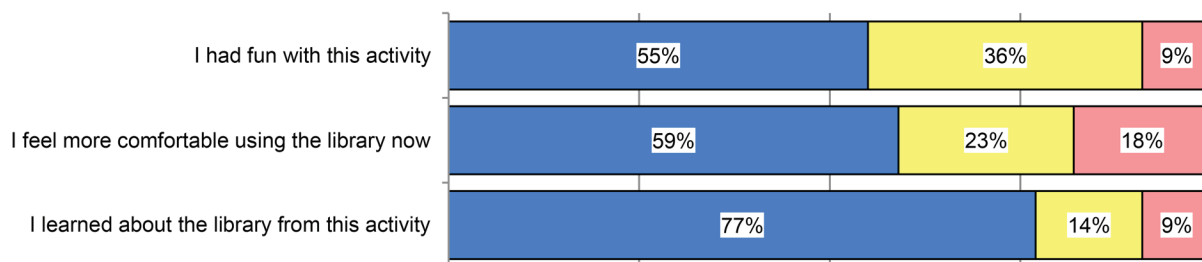
Figure 3: Student response to the scavenger hunt assignment, spring 2013 (n=22)

Discussion

Both activities were considered fun and educational by a majority of participants. However, survey results and my own observations indicate that students preferred the ARG to the scavenger hunt assignment. For me, the difference in student response to these activities is enough to justify the additional effort required to organize the ARG.

Students were also asked to rate their own familiarity with different library tasks. Although the survey indicated that the two activities were similarly effective as instructional tools, a majority (70%) of the scavenger hunt worksheets contained at least one incorrect answer. Scavenger hunt participants may have overestimated their own competence on the survey because during the activity they could not tell when they had made a mistake. In contrast, students participating in the ARG were unable to proceed until they found the next clue. Instead of a self-evaluation, a library skills quiz might provide a more accurate measure of the educational effectiveness of these activities.

Although I had intended for both activities to require a similar amount of library exploration, I observed that most of the students participating in the scavenger hunt remained sitting at the computers and completed their worksheets with information they found online. At the time, I assumed that this was because they preferred searching online to searching in the library stacks. However, in the comments section of the survey the most common suggestion for improving the scavenger hunt was to have it involve more exploration of the building. (The most common suggestion from ARG participants was that the game should be longer.) Students *wanted* to explore the library, but unlike the ARG, the scavenger hunt assignment failed to motivate them to do so.

References

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