Gaming and the Learning Commons:

Should gaming be brought to the academic library?

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Learning and Information Commons. What are they?

Learning and Information Commons are a fairly new concept that has been gaining popularity in recent decades. Both Learning Commons and Information Commons will be explored here as one is an extension of the other and both serve the students in an academic setting in similar ways. The article *The Information Commons and Learning Commons: Some Reflections* by Heitsch and Holley explores the differences between the two models. It is learned that the primary difference between the two is the learning outcome. An Information Commons (IC) supports learning while a Learning Commons (LC) takes the basic tenets of the IC and enhances them to support an environment where learning is created and self-directed (Heitsch & Holley, 2011, p. 65). This distinction is important to keep in mind when looking at the literature although much of the research uses the terms interchangeably.

A shift in focus, from traditional library models to LC, is also examined by Heitsch and Holley in the article. According to their research, the focus in libraries went from a book-centered paradigm in the twentieth century to be replaced by a learning-centered paradigm in which the users once again hold the position of importance (Heitsch & Holley, 2011, p. 66). When the focus was on books, the library was designed to ameliorate capacity in order to hold as many books as possible. This focus does not lead to an environment that encourages participation from the patrons but simply becomes a building where they can pick up materials. With the new focus, the library can benefit from new technology to change the emphasis from the materials to the patron. The basic model does not change since “information is still plentiful, even overabundant; but, its increasingly electronic nature allows libraries to reappropriate space that had been previously occupied by shelving and use it for more user-centered purposes” (Heitsch & Holley, 2011, p. 66). This user-centered purpose does not take away from regular library operation; in fact, it enhances it. According to Heitsch and Holley (2011), the “Commons model” (as they call it), “includes three levels, the Physical Commons, the Virtual Commons, and the Cultural Commons” (p. 66). Each serves its own purpose but is interconnected in order to create a more complete and educational experience for the student.

The Physical Commons consists of the computer hardware, furnishings, designated spaces, and traditional collections of the library. The Virtual Commons contains the digital library collections, online tools, electronic learning tools, and Web presence of the library. The third element, the Cultural Commons, is made up of the workshops, tutoring programs, research collaborations, and so forth, which takes place as a result of the environment created through the Commons. *The Information Commons Handbook* by Beagle (as cited in Heitsch and Holley, 2011, p. 178).
All of these elements are important for the functioning of the commons as “library staff [are] in a better position to assist their patrons with a broad array of problems, but the patrons are also able to find both assistance and solutions in a single location” (Heitsch & Holley, 2011, p. 68). The students also learn to be active participants in their own education. Schmidt and Kaufman discuss this aspect in Learning Commons: Bridging the Academic and Student Affairs Divide to Enhance Learning Across Campus (2007). The authors state that knowledge construction, a set of theories that emphasize the active role of the learner in building understanding and making sense of information, then becomes a social and collaborative process in LC (Schmidt & Kaufman, 2007, p. 247). Once again, an emphasis on collaboration is made. All of these elements are crucial to our understanding of LC as a concept, and to the introduction of new technologies in an academic library. Heitsch and Holley (2011) briefly discuss this topic and state the important point that “students come in with entertainment digital experience, but that does not translate into academic digital knowledge” (p. 71). A LC could be the perfect environment for this gap to be closed.

Learning Commons: a theoretical base

Many articles touch on LC but few look at the theories that spurred the movement. A seminal author in this field is Donald Beagle who has been crucial in the development of LC and IC in academic libraries. His article Conceptualizing an Information Commons explores the theoretical base behind Learning and Information Commons. The grounding principal behind the concept is that “organizational misalignment” occurs when the library fails to integrate different technological parts of the library together (Beagle, 1999, p. 84). “What is needed is a rethinking and reformulation of organizational structure, including an expansion of organizational scope” (Beagle, 1999, p. 84). A LC model (also referred to as IC) can solve this misalignment. In this case, it is important to discuss that “the information commons, as a conceptual, physical, and instructional space, involves an organizational realignment from print to the digital environment” (Beagle, 1999, p. 82). An additional article, also by Beagle, states that “the IC potentially offers a ‘continuum of service’ that can help the student move through and then beyond the established regime of information access and retrieval, through further steps of interpretation, processing, and manipulation, and on to the development, packaging, and presentation of new knowledge” (Beagle, 2010, pp. 9-10). Due to this new model, many boundaries that are present in traditional libraries will disappear or irrelevant. “Service units, instead of being highly distinctive, now share contiguous and permeable service boundaries” (Beagle, 1999, p. 84).

This can be achieved, according to Beagle (1999), through something he calls “strategic alignment” (p. 82). This strategy “relates the articulation of vision in strategic technology planning to the actualization of vision in infrastructure, process, and implementation” (Beagle, 1999, p. 82). This is done through strategic fit (aligning key elements of the organization’s external and internal domains with the larger institutional environment) and functional integration (Beagle, 1999, p. 82). When these two
elements are combined, “technology, services, staff, and users (...) can no longer be seen in isolation but must be viewed as a synergistic and interacting system in which change to any part inevitably results in change to the other three parts” (Beagle, 1999, p. 83). This change is very important when we consider the constant evolution of technology in our society. The strategic alignment also “involve[s] aligning the Information Commons with the interests and needs of the larger institutional and technological environment” (Beagle, 1999, p. 87). In this way, the entire academic community the LC services has input into the needs and goals. This cooperation is crucial and is discussed further in an additional Beagle article entitled *The Emergent Information Commons*. In this piece he examines the involvement of “academic units” in determining the goals of the LC (Beagle, 2010, p. 18). Beagle (2010) goes on to add that “librarians and academic computing staff cannot alone create a learning commons, as they serve but do not define institutional mission. Other academic units do that and must join librarians and technologist in creating a learning commons” (pp. 18-19). Schmidt and Kaufman (2007) add that it is important to have “partnerships that focus on activities that link or bridge the in-class and out-of-class experience of students” (p. 246). It becomes important for the LC to integrate itself into the student’s lives whether for schoolwork or personal entertainment. In order to achieve this goal Schmidt and Kaufman (2007) recommend the formation of “an operational management group [that] meets regularly to identify and recommend needs for space and equipment; opportunities for collaboration, staff training and development; solutions to problems; new or additional resources, and program and service priorities” (p. 251). This management group is similar to the system devised by Beagle mentioned above. An article by Bailey and Tierney (2002) also add to Beagle’s initial article by adding the concept of “the Information Commons Planning Group” (p. 278). Although published shortly after the Beagle article, the authors are crucial in advancing the theory behind the emerging LC model at that time. This planning group encourages participation by every department in the academic institution and are “responsible for developing all Commons resources and service plans and policies” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 279). The benefits of these collaborations are that “the different perspectives and complementary skill sets of the partners enhance [their] ability to provide a wider range of services to students in multiple formats” (Schmidt & Kaufman, 2007, p. 254). The variation in theories may make it seem that LC do not have a strong theoretical base but this is far from the case. The variety only shows that since “our services are designed to meet the needs of a diverse student body, [LC] adopt elements of different theories relevant to the needs of individual students and contexts” (Schmidt & Kaufman, 2007, pp. 246-47). This confirms the theory that many groups are responsible for the functioning of the LC and that everyone needs to collaborate to create a working unit. All of the pieces combined can better determine what the students need and make changes accordingly.

This leads to a second important element in LC described by Beagle (1999), functional integration (p. 82). This concept “requires staff flexibility and adaptability sufficient to support the new patterns of service” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 279). Without being open to change the Learning Commons cannot fulfill its purpose. The way LC are designed “offers the flexible work space all staff
need to apply their combined expertise adaptively to the rapidly changing needs of a highly demanding user community” (Beagle, 1999, p. 88). Students, especially those who were raised in a generation that has always had access to technology, expect the library to keep current. Not only that, but knowledge is not a static, performed substance and learning involves active engagement in the process of that change (Beagle, 1999, p. 88). In addition, Beagle (2010) continues this argument in a follow-up paper by saying that “the digital age is only in its infancy, and the pace and patterning of change will continue to challenge all aspects of library administration” (p. 23). As a consequence, he also “anticipate[s] that pressures for efficient internal collaboration and colocation will increase” (Beagle, 2010, p. 23). With these new challenges, LC and the people who manage them must be sensitive to needs and expectations of all involved.

**The learning commons: What does it look like?**

The physical space of the new Learning Commons is also of importance and is briefly discussed. There is much variety is the way the space can be designed, but the important thing to keep in mind is that the information commons is “a highly visible and easily accessed place staffed by librarians, research assistants, and technology experts, where students, faculty, researchers, and staff can come to find out about information technology, to learn how to make use of it, and to actually use and develop appropriate tools to retrieve and manipulate information” (Beagle, 1999, p. 85). These aspects are at the base of the Learning Commons model and cannot be ignored. Beagle (1999) also emphasizes the fact that the IC (or LC) should lie adjacent “with other campus units or projects where crucial partnerships are envisioned” (p. 85). Due to the highly collaborative nature of the LC model, this close proximity is very important to the overall functioning.

Another important physical aspect of the LC is the information desk. In this new model the information desk is crucial to filtering where students will go to find the information they need. It “serves as the first point of service that library patrons encounter upon entering the building, providing basic information on all services and resources within the Library, as well as general information about the University” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 280). Having such a desk enables the other service areas, reference and technological services, to be specialized and focused, as will be discussed. The information desk will refer students to the appropriate service area based on their initial question. This desk is also crucial to the accomplishment of functional integrity as it sits at the center of a broad array of Commons constituent participants and acts as a go between (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 281).

**LC: Who uses them?**

LC, while becoming increasingly common, provide instruction and assistance for all students in the academic setting but the emphasis is increasingly about reaching out to a new generation that has grown up using technology. This generation is very familiar with the ever changing technology available
to them and LC need to take advantage of that. The article *Connecting 24/5 to Millennials* explores the generation of academic students that were raised being familiar with new technology and looks at their expectations in a LC. In order to do so, Moore and Wells (2009) studied the UMass Amherst Learning Commons to see “who visits a Learning Commons, how often they visit, what services they use, how they want to receive reference and technology assistance, and what enhancements they want” (p. 75). The authors discovered four attributes of Millennials relating to library services including high expectations, the prospect of customization, the prevalence of technology veterans, and utilization of new communication modes (Moore and Wells, 2009, p. 76). These are very important to consider since Millennials are a large population of new students today. A study of Japanese LC has shown that the presence of Millennials has been felt worldwide. Donkai, Toshimori, and Mizoue have studied LC in Japan to see what kinds of resources are required and what reasoning academic institutions may have for creating them. They found that today’s students are ‘digital natives’ as they are the first generation to grow up with digital technology and they have a characteristic learning style (Donkai, Toshimori, & Mizoue, 2011, p. 216). The article also discusses that the shift in learning styles mentioned in the previous section can be attributed to the emergence of “digital natives” in academic institutions. Donkai et al. (2011) notes that “they favor intuitive visual communications and learn better through discovery than through being taught. Their style requires high-quality visual technologies and collaboration working spaces” (p. 216). These requirements and new learning styles are perfect for an emerging LC. The LC environment is conducive to this kind of learning and the collaboration between departments in the institution enables new technologies to be integrated. LC must consider their learning styles when establishing curriculums and services but it does not mean that these students do not value traditional services. The Japanese LC share many characteristics with others such as computer networks and clusters; collaborative learning spaces, cafes, library orientations, information literacy courses, etc (Donkai et al., 2011, p. 217). As the services available increase and evolve, so will the ways in which they can be used by students. Many students in the Moore and Wells (2009) study chose to use the LC as a study area, making it crucial to combine reference with all other aspects of the LC. “If library public services cater to the characteristics of Millennials, they can create a recipe for new reference and technology support services” (Moore and Wells, 2009, p. 76).

Many of their expectations in the LC will require that “librarians (…) connect with the students where, how, and when they need help and might learn research skills” (Moore and Wells, 2009, p. 75). Not only does this include innovative uses of technology and support, but this study also shows that traditional reference services are appreciated. The vast majority of students surveyed preferred face-to-face interaction with librarians and when asked about reference services making personal relationships with librarians important (Moore and Wells, 2009, pp.78-81). Eliminating the reference desk in LC would prevent students from having this interaction and hinder their learning process. The article also recommends “additional research [to] investigate the application of emerging digital media to providing reference and technology services conveniently for students” (Moore and Wells, 2009, p.
As libraries evolve so do the services they provide. As mentioned previously, some LC have considered eliminating the reference desk in anticipation of remote reference but making such a drastic change can be detrimental to the overall functioning of a LC. The article *Reference Librarians at the Reference Desk in a Learning Commons* takes a look at this issue. Fitzpatrick, Moore, and Lang (2008) determine that rather than eliminating the desk altogether, “the Reference desk could step back from its tech support role, providing an opportunity to rethink its desk staffing model” (Fitzpatrick, Moore, & Lang, 2008, p. 233). Their study also showed that students preferred face-to-face interaction when requesting reference help (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 235). In a LC “reference librarians handle a lower overall volume of questions because directional questions are funneled to the information desk directly inside the building entrance, and technical questions to the LC and TS [technical services] desk” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 233). Due to this cooperation between departments in the LC, the reference desk can focus on providing more in depth help. This model also enables librarians to regain their professional identity. The authors state that this is often lost by librarians “when they handle routine technical help at such a volume that eclipses their professional role” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 234). By having other desks answer these routine questions the librarians can focus on helping solely with research.

Fitzpatrick et al. also surveyed librarians to determine the greatest advantages of having the reference desk separate from a help desk or tech desk. The results show the importance of reference interactions and the benefits of the LC model for reference interactions. When asked what the biggest advantages are to the LC model, librarians responded with “the increase in quality of service [since] librarians conducted reference interactions better and more efficiently than staff and students who were perhaps more eager than qualified to help” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 237). Another advantage was that it became “clearer to the users that [the reference desk’s purpose is to provide expert research help” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 237). This means that the students were aware that the other desks were for technical help, or other queries, and not for reference. The librarians “also valued the elimination of distracting tech, printer, and photocopier questions, giving them more time to ‘do reference’” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008, p. 237). Having faster reference interactions has been a concern with this model but it may be something that students are willing to give up in order to get more specialized reference help. The disadvantages with doing reference this way are far outweighed by the benefits.

**LC drawbacks and things to consider**

Like any other emerging concepts, LC have some drawbacks that need to be acknowledged
when considering changing an existing traditional library into a LC or IC. Most articles that we looked at have some concerns about the LC model. Schmidt and Kaufman (2007), in particular, worry “that the services and activities associated with the Learning Commons were not in keeping with the traditional role of the library” and that “the Library was relinquishing much-needed space for non-library services” (p. 252). Although both of these issues may be true, we must consider the changing nature of the traditional library as emphasized by Beagle. Without these changes the system will not be able to keep up with increased expectations from students. As stated by Moore and Wells (2009), “Millennials want information and support available online, 24/7, immediately, and at least initially self-service” (p. 76). When looking at these new needs for students, traditional library services cannot be expected to fulfill the need. Moore and Wells (2009) also note that “although users are satisfied with the services currently offered, they have high expectations for library and technology services and expect libraries to constantly evolve to meet their changing needs” (p. 84). The loss of space will be a small price to pay for the increased traffic and use of the library. New technologies and teaching methods will also change the way libraries are used regardless of the model it employs. Using a LC model, in this case, only shows that libraries are willing to be flexible and innovative with their style.

Another possible drawback is based on the theory of the “tragedy of the commons” by Lawrence Lessig. This brings to light “the tendency to freely consume ‘commons’ resources without responsible maintenance and replenishment of these same resources” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 281). In other words, “left unmonitored, some patrons would abuse resources to the point that they were depleted or somehow despoiled and made insufficient for patron needs” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 281). Although this is a serious threat, training and continued collaboration, that has been mentioned several times, should curtail taking advantage of the system. When students are reminded that the LC environment is for their benefit and for everyone to share, hopefully the problem will be minimal. Many factors will have an influence on the likelihood of a “tragedy of the commons” but it should be kept in mind when being created.

Many of the articles reviewed above mention these considerations but all have continued forward with their plans for the conversion. “Awareness and careful monitoring of these tendencies will allow greater control over them” (Bailey and Tierney, 2002, p. 284). The benefits of the model, according to the authors, have been shown to outweigh the risks and they are confident that strong collaboration can reduce the likelihood of failure. Overall, “the development of the Commons system, made possible by the explosion of electronic resources has freed the library from servitude to the size of their print collections and allowed them to make themselves more in tune with the needs of their patrons” (Heitsch, 2011, p. 75).

**Part Two: Gaming and Learning**
The second focus of our research is to see if gaming has a place in an academic institution, namely the learning commons. Seminal research was conducted by James Paul Gee in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2007). In it, and many articles hence, he outlines 32 principles of learning that are built into computer and video games. These principles cover topics such as *co-design* and *customize* to others like *identity formation* and *system thinking*. All of these principles are nested under three sections that will be familiar to both educators and librarians: Empowered Learners, Problem Solving, and Understanding (Gee, 2004). It was Gee, as a cognitive scientist, who gave credence to using computer and video games within an academic institution. Stating in an article, *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* “Good games operate at the outer and growing edge of a player’s competence, remaining challenging, but do-able, while schools often operate at the lowest common denominator (Gee, 2003). In his books and articles Gee pushes for games to be integrated into schools and that they can be used as a way to enhance learning not detract from it (2004). This is especially important considering the audience and patrons that libraries have and will have. Marc Prensky’s book *Don’t bother Me Mom - I’m Learning!* (2006), youth are responsible for about 10,000+ hours of videogame playing, 10,000+ hours on their cell phones, and 20,000+ hours watching television per year (pp 27-28). Yet it is important to remember that the average age of the gamer is 35 years old (ALA Gaming Day). Gaming generations have become ubiquitous within today’s society. Gen X’ers,, Millennials, and the Net Generation especially have come to view technology as a necessity and not as an add-on (Hitch, 2005). The potential for gaming to become even more ingrained in everyday life is a very real possibility. David Warlick stresses in *The New Literacy* that gaming enforces the new literacies inherent within our tech-hungry and web-savvy youth. The literacies Warlick references are exposing knowledge, employing information, expressing ideas compellingly, and ethics on the internet (2004). Not only are computer and video games relevant and here to stay but they also have been shown to strengthen and complement literacy programs and educational models at all ages. James Ford’s article, *Connecting with the Millennial Student* states that if Millennials are the driving force behind the marketplace and workforce then they will also be the change that demands change in the “educational realm” (2007).

**Gaming and Literacy**

Literacy in its broadest sense is the ability for one to read and write coherently and understand symbols. It has been a mission of libraries to encourage and foster literacy. Libraries have a commitment to provide education, socialization, and democratization for all people (Adams, 2009, 197). The literature surrounding the act of gaming and literacy is mostly written for and by library professionals. In Adams’ article, *The Case for Video Games in Libraries*, it is said of Information professionals “rather than strictly maintaining our role as arbiters of good information we need to rethink our role in supporting information skills that will be important in the future” (pp.199). With librarians rethinking how to
support information skills comes the next progression on how to promote literacy while still staying relevant. On the American Library Association’s *Gaming and Literacy* wiki an outline is presented on the connection between literacy and gaming and why it is important for the library. They say, “As new technologies, tools and toys have burgeoned over the last 20 years so has our understanding of what literacy is and can be (2012). Information literacy or the learning about the “discovery, selection, and use of appropriate information resources” (Nicholson, 2010, p 8) have become a staple within academic, public, and school libraries. Nicholson, in his book *Everyone Plays at the Library* makes the case that because of their complexity role-playing games require several books in order to play and that they must retrieve information throughout multiple gaming sessions and judge whether the information gathered is trustworthy or not. Even the basest of literacy definitions (reading, writing, and interpreting symbols) games excel at imparting these skills to their players. The idea that gaming is a visual medium only has never played many of games available (p 7). Computer and video games are chock full of reading, maps, and symbol interpretation. As the ALA says, “there is no doubt that gaming and literacy go hand-in-hand. If you can’t read, you can’t play” (2012).

**Gaming in the Library**

In 2011, Sarah McNicols created an online survey to determine the attitudes of Librarians toward adding computer and video games to their collections. The survey was completed by a self-selecting sample of libraries that was based on a similar survey done by LibGameLab at Syracuse (50). The survey showed that 95% of respondents felt that there were clear benefits with having gaming in the library. The librarians stated reasons such as, attracting new users to the library, supporting social interactions, helping to develop social skills, they’re fun, and they could help change negative perceptions of the library and its staff (2011, p 58). Librarians also believed that gaming could help with literacy, creativity and IT skills (58). One librarian who participated in the survey said, “It (gaming) brings all types of young people into the centre who may not in the past use a library or be seen in it! Students are more likely to read a book/comic wilt waiting to use the Wii, sometimes even borrow an item (57–58). Suellen Adams’ article *The Case for Video Games in Libraries* she says “Having a robust video game program that is well planned and carried out, can actually support all three purposes delineated above. By exercising careful thought in game selection and gaming policies, librarians can, through the use of video game programs provide and support education, promote community interaction not only among young people, but among a broader spectrum of patrons, and even level the playing field between haves and have-nots” (2009, p 197). The three purposes Adams speaks of are Education, Socialization, and Democratization. All of the literature on the subject of gaming and libraries are unanimous in their declarations that gaming is in alignment with libraries goals and missions and should be a welcomed addition to all libraries collections.
Gaming and Academic Libraries

In 2005, Hitch and Duncan wrote, *Games in Higher Ed: When Halo 2, Civilization IV, and Xbox 360 Come to Campus* they state that, “Gaming isn’t on the radar for most academic libraries. But soon, it may be a blip at the edge. A review of peer-reviewed scholarly publications for the field reveals that gaming is virtually nonexistent, either as it relates to academic library services or academic library collections. However, there is ample evidence of a growing discussion within blogs and deep-web resources about the social lure of games, and how some public libraries see games as one more way of drawing in teens and connecting with their communities” (p 4). The idea of having gaming within an academic library is relatively new. Academic papers on the topic of gaming in University libraries really took off once Universities began offering gaming curricula. One such program at the University of Southern California has “heavy emphasis on game design and significant cooperation with the video game industry... (they) also address the cultural and historical meanings of gaming” (Robson & Durkee, 2012, p 80). Having a gaming program established at your place of higher education will of course make the transition to offering computer and video games within the library easier but much of the literature states that they don’t have to be in place for the benefits to be seen. Hitch & Duncan see computer and video games not as a passive medium. They’re not like watching television or listening to the radio. They are interacting and social. Hitch & Duncan thinks, “increasing the use of video games by this and forthcoming generations will actually force (higher education) changes”(2005, p7). Both Robson & Durkee and Hitch & Duncan believe that it is essential to build a space within the library for gaming. Robson & Durkee state, “We believe that an essential part of building a vibrant gaming collection is making spaces within the library for gaming, integrating the gaming collection into the fabric of academic life in the university library” (2012, p 83). Hitch & Durkee actually use the term Information Commons when saying, “A likely place at the library for delivering or providing access to such resources might be an Information Commons or other educational technology facility where students connect, create or collaborate” (2005, p 5). The literature and research supports gaming in libraries and endorses it within an academic setting. However, there were still a minority of negative views regarding gaming from librarians within the studies conducted by McNicol. Some thought gaming would create too much noise or drive out loyal patrons. While others were concerned about the difficulty in managing behavior (2011, p60). Cost is also a challenge noted by many librarians, but since most academic libraries offer popular reading and computers that aren’t specifically designated for school work the cost argument doesn’t hold much water. If the need and want is present then the budget needs to make room for it. There is a gap in the literature about whether or not gaming in learning commons or within an academic institution at all, gets results.
Research Design

The ultimate objective of this study is to determine whether gaming will provide enough potential benefit to the University community to warrant its inclusion in the USRI Lovecraft Learning Commons. A review of the related literature suggests potential benefits to both faculty members and students, but very little research has been conducted to measure the perceived and demonstrated value of these resources among users within the context of the Learning Commons. Since the USRI Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons wishes to determine whether the potential benefits warrant the cost of implementing a gaming program, this study has been designed to address the following questions:

- Do faculty members imagine possible academic applications of gaming technology in the Learning Commons?
- Do faculty members believe that these benefits outweigh any likely problems?
- Do students find that gaming fosters cohesion among their social groups?
- Do students find that increased social cohesion contributes to a positive study experience in the
Library and Learning Commons?

Because this research primarily explores issues of perceived benefit and potential applications, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to permit research subjects to express themselves freely, while also allowing the researchers to provide structure to the study.

Time Frame

This research will be performed over the course of the 2013-2014 academic year at the University of Southern Rhode Island, between September 2012 and April 2013. This study is qualitative in nature, and will hinge upon perceived usefulness for two groups of users: current USRI permanent faculty, and current USRI undergraduate students. This study will be conducted in two phases: the first targeting faculty, and the second targeting students.

Site

All components will be conducted on the University of Southern Rhode Island main campus. Faculty interviews will be conducted in faculty offices. Student focus groups will be conducted in the USRI Lovecraft Learning Commons. The researchers have identified a suite of rooms that will provide adequate space for participant selection, and adequate privacy for group activities and for the focus group itself. Necessary equipment will be provided from the researchers’ own gaming collections.

Study Objectives

The objective of the faculty interview phase of the study will be to invite experienced University educators to provide their perspective on the application of gaming as a means of fostering group cohesion among students, the possible applications of gaming within their personal course curricula, and to explore the academic issues and concerns related to gaming in the Learning Commons.

The objective of the student focus group phase of the study will be to explore student perspectives on gaming as a means of fostering group cohesion through the prism of a hands-on activity designed to simulate the intended function of gaming within the Learning Commons. The research will include a total of 30 participants, including 10 faculty members and 20 students.

Necessary Permissions

Permissions will be required from USRI University administration, USRI Lovecraft Library administration, and the USRI Human Research Protection Program. Permission will also be secured from each individual participating in the study via a signed consent form prior to performing any research activities.

Phase I: Faculty
This phase of the study will be conducted during the Fall 2013 academic semester exclusive of the first and last two weeks of classes. It will take the form of semi-structured interviews with current, permanent USRI faculty members from any department.

**Interviewee pool selection:** An initial call for interviewees will be sent via email to the entire permanent faculty of the University. Responses will be evaluated as they are received to confirm participant eligibility and availability during the allotted time period. The first 100 confirmed-eligible responses will form the pool from which interviewees will be selected.

**Interviewee selection:** From the pool of eligible interviewees, 10 will be selected at random and contacted to confirm willingness to participate. Interviewees who subsequently choose not to participate will be discarded, and a replacement interviewee will be chosen at random from the remaining pool until 10 faculty study participants are confirmed.

**Interviews:** An in-person interview will be conducted with each of the participants. Each interview will be conducted in the respective faculty member’s office at a time of their preference within the designated time period allotted to the study. The interview will be semi-structured to provide for consistency, while also allowing the interviewee to express themselves fully in their responses. The interview instrument will be designed by the researchers, each question having been originally created or adapted by the study authors and pre-tested with unselected faculty members. All interviews will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to text.

**Interview Analysis**

When 10 interviews have been conducted and their responses transcribed, the resulting data will be analyzed by the researchers to determine whether faculty can imagine applications for gaming within their course curricula, and whether faculty perceive gaming as having potential benefits for social interaction and group study among students. Analysis will be conducted through the use of Open Coding to identify patterns and key concepts in the data, followed by Selective Coding to determine core issues of positive and negative concern among faculty members. This analysis will later be used to inform the creation of the research instrument for the second phase of research targeting students.

**Phase II: Students**

This phase of the study will be conducted during the Spring 2014 academic semester, exclusive of the first and last two weeks of classes. It will take the form of a series of five focus groups, each made up of four current USRI undergraduate students who are unknown to each other. The focus group format will allow students to participate in an activity designed to simulate the intended function of gaming in the Learning Commons, followed by a group discussion to explore the results of that activity and any benefits and concerns they perceive related to the activity. Focus groups will take place in the URSl Lovecraft Learning Commons during the afternoon of each selected date. Dates will be selected according to the academic schedule, to provide access to students from a variety of departments and majors.
Focus group pool selection: On the day of each scheduled focus group, an initial call for participants will be made via USRI Campus Announcements. Incentive will be provided in the form of either a) pizza provided at the focus group site for all volunteers while supplies last; or b) coupons for a free slice of pizza at a local restaurant for all volunteers while supplies last. Incentives for at least 40 volunteers will be available at each focus group.

From the group of volunteers responding for each focus group, four participants will be selected at random and evaluated for eligibility. Eligibility will be determined by the volunteer’s current student status and unfamiliarity with all other members of the focus group. When four eligible participants have been selected, all other volunteers will be dismissed.

First focus group activity: Each focus group will initially be led to a prototype gaming station in the Learning Commons. This gaming station will consist of a monitor, an Xbox 360 console equipped with the game Rock Band, and three guitar-type controllers and one drum-type controller. The focus group will be given 30 minutes to freely play Rock Band together.

Second focus group activity: Upon completion of the gaming session, the focus group will be given a research challenge to complete together. The research challenge will consist of an intermediate-level research problem to solve using USRI Lovecraft Library and/or Learning Commons resources. Each challenge will be designed by an USRI librarian and confirmed as solvable using available resources. The focus group will be allotted 20 minutes to work on the research challenge, and then brought back to the focus group space whether or not they have achieved a solution.

Focus group: After completing the initial activity, the students will participate in a focus group designed to explore their attitudes toward gaming as an element of the Learning Commons. The focus group will be conducted by two researchers using questions that have been created by the study authors, and adjusted according to faculty interview responses. Each focus group will be video-recorded and subsequently transcribed to text. The objective of the focus group will be to determine the influence of the initial gaming session upon group formation and cohesion, and the perceived effects of that influence upon the students’ subsequent efforts to solve a research challenge together. Each focus group will last no longer than 30 minutes.

When all five focus groups have been completed and all responses transcribed, results will be analyzed by the researchers. Analysis will focus on whether group cohesion was achieved according to the participants’ perception of the activities, whether group cohesion contributed to a better library research experience, and whether participants perceived general value in the inclusion of gaming in the Learning Commons.

Further Development

With additional time and resources, the researchers would wish to include the following features in order to improve the quality of the conducted research:
**Expert faculty interviews:** In addition to the semi-structured interviews with randomly-selected members of faculty from across the spectrum of departments, the researchers would also wish to include purposive interviews with key faculty members whose curricula are especially related to gaming and related concepts. Such faculty might be drawn from the Computer Science, Mathematics, Engineering, or Social Sciences departments. The researchers believe that the views and opinions of faculty members who particularly work with technological, gaming, and social concepts could provide special insight into the possible applications and general significance of gaming in the context of a Learning Commons.

**Secondary focus groups:** In addition to the planned focus groups as written, the researchers would optimally include a second set of focus groups designed to serve as an experimental control. These groups would be selected using the same methods described above, and would proceed similarly with the exclusion the first gaming activity. The focus group would begin with the research challenge activity and continue with the focus group. This would allow the researchers to isolate the variable of gaming as a method of forming social cohesion prior to engaging in library research. Results of these focus groups would be analyzed similarly, focusing on whether group cohesion was established even without the gaming activity component, and the effects of that result on the subsequent library research activity.

References


Moore, A., & Wells, K. A. Connecting 24/5 to millennials: Providing academic support services from a learning commons, 35, 1, 75-85. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2008.10.016


Appendices

CURSORY EMAIL: CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons staff and University of Southern Rhode Island faculty,

Earlier this Spring a committee was formed by administration to determine whether gaming will provide enough potential benefit to the University community to warrant its inclusion in the USRI Lovecraft Learning Commons. The members of this committee have for the past few months compiled relevant literature and past university studies pertaining to gaming and the benefits to libraries. The next step is to call for staff and faculty volunteers to participate in short 15-30 minute interview where committee members will attempt to ascertain academic issues and concerns relating to gaming in the libraries. Interested parties will then be chosen at random during the summer break. Those chosen from the initial applicants will be given time slots of potential interview times during the last two weeks of October 2013.

If you are interested in helping the committee with its research please respond to gamingadvisory@ursi.edu with the subject GAMING LIBRARY INTERVIEW and include your name and email address with the body of the email.

Thank you for your time,

URSI Lovecraft and Learning Commons Gaming Committee
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:
100 volunteers - 10 chosen at random to partake in the interview process.

Interviews to take place between October 22nd and November 2nd of 2013

Time slots available:

Monday, 22nd 10am, 1pm, 3:30pm

Wednesday, 24th 10am, 1pm, 3:30pm

Friday, 26th 10am, 1pm, 3:30pm

Saturday, 27th 11am, 2pm

Tuesday, 30th 9am, 11am, 4pm

Thursday, 1st 9am, 11am, 4pm

Interviews to be completed by Jessie on Tuesday and Friday.
Interviews to be completed by Amy on Saturday and Thursday.
Interviews to be completed by Carolyne on Monday.
Interviews to be completed by Jaki on Wednesday.

Participants will choose a time that fits their schedule.

If a participant finds that none of these times work for them, one from the committee will work with the participant to find an ideal time to conduct the interview.

All interviews will take place in faculty offices, with the exception of staff or faculty that do not have permanent or private offices. In this case the committee will use the conference room in the Lovecraft Library.
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: (make sure tape recorder is on and has enough tape and battery to last for 30 minutes).

What is your job title?

Do you have any personal experience with gaming? (video games, online gaming, etc...)

Have you ever used games of any kind in your curriculum?

Is there a place for gaming within your discipline?

How do you think gaming can be applied to your classroom?

Do you feel that gaming can lead to group cohesion?

Are there academic issues or concerns you may have with using gaming as a learning device?

Are you familiar with the Lovecraft Learning Commons?

Do you think the Lovecraft Learning Commons may a good place for faculty and library staff to experiment with different gaming tools?
INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

The Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons at the University of Southern Rhode Island supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach. Likewise, if you choose not to participate, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

The Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons are conducting an informal study to determine the benefits and potential applications of adding gaming to our learning commons. A committee will be choosing library staff who have agreed to be interviewed at random. A member of the committee will then interview the subjects separately. A tape recorder will be used during this process to ensure that all information gathered is accurate and fair. The interview should take anywhere from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes.

All answers will be kept confidential and the recorded session will be destroyed after transcription.

Through these interviews the committee hopes to gain enough cursory knowledge to form a structured focus group. This focus group containing undergraduate students along with the interviews from library staff should supply the committee with enough information to guide the committee’s actions going into the 2014-2015 school year.

We are dedicated to making sure that you are completely comfortable with this process. If you have any questions or concerns a member of our committee will answer and address them immediately.

"I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in
this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach."

____________________________________  __________________________
Subject                                         Date

____________________________________  __________________________
Parent or Guardian (if subject is a minor)       Date

Request for institutional permission for on-site research will be submitted electronically through Online submission for Institutional Review.

Our committee is expecting an expedited study.

**Criteria for an Expedited Study:**
Studies that don’t fall into the exempt categories may be expedited if two criteria are met: first, the study must be **minimal risk** (i.e., “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests”); second, the study must fall into one of several specific categories. Most student projects that are not exempt fall into what is known as expedited category 7:

“Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, **interview**, oral history, **focus group**, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.”

Our study is defined at “minimal risk” and is applying interview and focus group as our research methods.

source: [http://www.irb.pitt.edu/studentResearch/#irb3](http://www.irb.pitt.edu/studentResearch/#irb3)
FOCUS GROUP INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

The Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons at the University of Southern Rhode Island supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach. Likewise, if you choose not to participate, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

The Lovecraft Library and Learning Commons are conducting an informal study to determine the benefits and potential applications of adding gaming to our learning commons. At random 4 individuals will be chosen to play Rock Band together on an Xbox 360 for a total of 30 minutes.

Upon completion of gaming session your group will be asked a research question. The group will be allotted 20 minutes to solve the question. After this initial activity, you will be asked to participate in a focus group to determine your attitudes about the subsequent process.

This session will be videotaped.

All answers will be kept confidential and the recorded session will be destroyed after transcription.

Through these activities the committee hopes to gain enough information to be able to create an implementation plan regarding gaming in the learning commons.
We are dedicated to making sure that you are completely comfortable with this process. If you have any questions or concerns a member of our committee will answer and address them immediately.

"I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach."

Subject ___________________________________________ Date ___________________________

Parent or Guardian (if subject is a minor) ___________________________________________ Date ___________________________