Gaming in the Libraries

By Maira Bundza, Central Reference

Have you ever run through a library in your stocking feet, or were encouraged to have fun and be loud in a library? Well, that is what happened at Waldo Library on two Friday nights in February of this year. Seventy-six high school students, who had come to Western Michigan University to interview for Medallion Scholarships, were enticed to an evening in Waldo on February 11 and 18, 2005.

Each year, usually in February, outstanding high school seniors interview and compete at WMU for a substantial scholarship to attend the University. In recent years, applicant numbers have fallen off, and a recommendation from a consulting firm suggested that the students might be more attracted if challenging programs or activities were offered as well as sample lectures. Dean Joe Reish, University Libraries, offered to host what he referred to as a “fun event” that would occur on the night before the interviews. His offer was accepted, and “the game was afoot”—to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes.

An informal committee consisting of Adrienne MacKenzie, the Coordinator of Orientation; Dean Reish; Regina Buckner, the Director of Operational Services; members of the Information Literacy Committee; and all interested staff met several times to plan. The idea that emerged was to have activities that were instructional; would give the visiting seniors some skills to survive in college; and, at the same time, would offer an evening to enjoy, that is, to have fun! After much discussion, the planners decided on four challenges or games that, in essence, demonstrated key resources available in our libraries and developed skills needed for research.

Waldo Library was closed to the public on both evenings with the prospective game players scheduled at 7:00. When all were assembled, each individual was given a call number (usually used only to order books on the shelves) and then had to line themselves up in call number order around the second floor atrium. This was their first learning task since few had ever seen or used a Library of Congress book number. After an introduction and welcome by David Isaacson, Central Reference, on the first evening, and Elaine Jayne, also from Central Reference, on the second, the “orderly” group was divided up into eight teams. Two teams went to each challenge game, and competed against each other; only twenty minutes were allotted per challenge, and everything moved with considerable alacrity as well as antic resolutions. Before the evening was over, four unique gaming experiences “happened” to each group of students.

Artifacts of the Elders was created by our Director of Archives and Regional History Collections, Sharon Carlson, with help from our new Systems employee DJ Wyrick. The challenge was meant to introduce students to archival and rare materials held by the University Libraries. Students examined assorted memorabilia and “rare artifacts” from the WMU Archives to answer a series of questions and unravel a cryptogram. Questions included, for example, the cost of tuition in 1913 and rules for female students at Western in the 1940s and 1950s. The cryptogram was followed by an anagram, which revealed some information about materials in the Libraries’ Special Collections. This “game” turned out to be one of the favorite challenges for the students, and showed them that libraries contain more than books and periodicals.

Battle of the Search Engines was designed by Science Reference Librarian Barbara Cockrell and Off Campus Services Librarian Michele Behr. The “battle” illustrated the advantages and disadvantages of an open Internet search engine, in this case Google, versus an online database, i.e., Proquest’s ABI/INFORM Global. Each
team was challenged to find up to fourteen different kinds of sources (e.g., magazine article, statistical table, resource published in the past six months, etc.) on a topic. First they used Google, a search interface with which they are familiar, and then ABI/INFORM, a comprehensive online index to information available only to WMU students, faculty, and staff. The underlying goal was to teach students the distinction between a public, open vocabulary database as opposed to a licensed, carefully designed index, with sophisticated searching options, when preparing a college research paper.

The Citation Jumble and Plagiarism Puzzle were created by Science Reference Librarian Linda Rolls to give students a chance to master two key elements of putting together a research paper. In the first game, the contenders learned how to assemble the essential parts of a citation in proper order. Each team had a book, an article from a journal, and a Web site for which they had to put together a complete citation. The parts of each reference were drawn from a basket containing laminated slips, each of which identified one of a citation’s components (e.g., author, title, date, volume number, pages, URL, etc.). The Plagiarism Puzzle was a series of questions to see if these potential student authors knew what is and what is not plagiarism. Somewhat surprising was the fact that none of the teams answered all the questions on plagiarism correctly. But, the “wrong” answers motivated a dynamic and informative discussion about plagiarism, which will be valuable for these future college paper writers.

Finally, in the Go for the Gold challenge, students competed to see which team could find and retrieve the most books in twenty minutes. Prior to the evening’s activities, Elaine Anderson Jayne and Maira Bundza, both Central Reference librarians, had compiled ten different lists of materials located on all four floors of the library. The items included a reference book, a current journal, as well as books with provocative titles, such as What Einstein Told His Barber, Emperors of Chocolate, and Bus 9 to Paradise. For the answer to the final question, students needed to use the huge lighted globe found in the Reference area on the first floor—a final test of their GPS skills! To play this game, the competing teams were first given a brief lesson on how to use the WestCat catalog, and quickly learned to search by author and title to find call numbers for the items. Then, students used a bookmark and map of the library that provided information about floor location of Library of Congress call numbers. The game was truly afoot as students dashed off to one of the four floors of stacks or special collections, located the item on the shelf, and dashed back with the book or answer to the starting point.

This particular challenge had both social and educational purposes. It encouraged students to discuss how to divide up the task to accomplish expeditiously the goal and to work together as a team. In their joint efforts, they also had a chance to know each other better. Further, many students feel overwhelmed when they come from a small high school library and need to use the large research collection here at WMU. We gave them minimal instruction, but encouraged them to ask questions. Amid the laughter and animated conversations, we observed students who strategized and tackled the problems, ran to their designated floors, and met and regrouped to check to see what items still needed to be found. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and we laughed at the large pile of shoes left at the Reference Desk, shed in their efforts to move faster.

As the games ended, all gathered in the third floor atrium for snacks and the award ceremony. Prizes were awarded for each time one team beat the other team at a challenge, and there were two overall prizes for the best two teams. All the students and staff who “worked the games” introduced themselves, thus providing another opportunity to welcome the prospective students to the University and wish them well in their interviews to be held the following day. Most important, there was an atmosphere of fun and excitement among the students and staff that is rarely seen in the daily routine of the library. The games were afoot, the races were run and won, and the Libraries reflected a University where information and knowledge are to be found in special places.

With Apologies to ... Dwight B. Waldo

In the article “Centennial Afterthoughts” (Gatherings, Fall 2004, No. 35), words were put in Dr. Waldo’s mouth that he would never have uttered! A list of the five names of WMU from its beginnings in 1903 until today was incorrect. For the record, and with an editorial mea culpa, the names are:

Western State Normal School: 
May 27, 1903 - May 11, 1927

Western State Teachers College: 
May 12, 1927 - May 19, 1941

Western Michigan College of Education: May 20, 1941 - June 1, 1955

Western Michigan College: 
June 2, 1955 - February 25, 1957

Western Michigan University: 
February 26, 1957 - Present