THE DESCRIPTATHON MODEL

To Bracket or Not Bracket: Experiments in Gamification in the Wilds of Technical Communication

OVERVIEW

"Gamification" research has evolved and grown dramatically in recent years, gaining popularity across disciplines. While such efforts have generated headway in many respects, and in various directions – from conceptual understandings to user studies – the field could benefit from more work focused upon use in research methodologies at the nexus of practice and theory. This poster, in turn, reflects upon such an experiment aimed at the design and application of gamification techniques within a typical technical-communication context. In this case, subject matter experts within the National Park Service were being asked to improve accessibility of their site brochures by audio describing them. In turn, ***we put them through a hackathon-inspired process called a "Descriptathon."***

METHOD

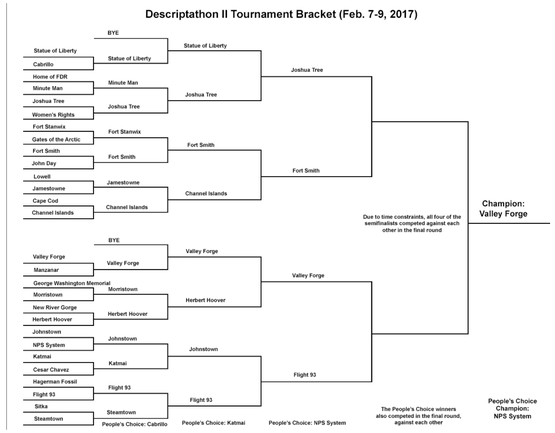
During this training, participants were given an overview of audio description, as a process, as well as introduced to a web tool (www.unidescription.org) and then asked to use that tool to create the description for their site brochure. Similar to a sports tournament, National Park Service sites were paired in this process and told they would be competing to see who could write the better audio description of a provided media artifact. Each round offered a new artifact to describe, with an increasing level of difficulty, starting with a photographic portrait of Thomas Edison and followed by a landscape photo in Denali National Park and Preserve, an Everglades National Park collage, and a Yellowstone National Park map, (shown, right), all retrieved as some of the most challenging examples from our Phase 1 training with other parks. Unlike previous training exercises in this project, though, this group also was organized by sites into a tournament bracket (as shown, to the right), in which pairs of parks competed against each other. The winner of each round, as determined by an independent panel of judges, advanced to the next round, spurred by the promise of fun Hawaiian-themed prizes at the end. ***This gamification strategy appeared to generate more research-focused data, than the previous training exercises we have offered, per user. But it also seemed to disenfranchise some as well, who dropped out of this voluntary training, creating a mix of results.***

METHODOLOGY

Interest in gameplay to improve human processes is not new, by any means, but it did surge as an idea again in the mid-2000s, when a convergence of new mobile and web technologies intersected with evolving digital business models (Bogost, 2016; McGonigal, 2011; Nacke & Deterding, 2016; Walz & Deterding, 2015). Gamification, as the term du jour, has been thought to drive behavior in situations outside of games, including in serious contexts, by, among other outcomes, spurring innovation, increasing engagement, and raising efficiency (Rauch, 2013). ***Technical communication is a natural home for gamification studies, because of crossover interests in interface design, information management, and systems development***; game design also revolves around concepts common in the academic field's practices, such as iterative design, rapid prototyping, and user testing (deWinter & Vie, 2016). In this scholarly arena, researchers now are moving past the fundamental questions of definitions and motivations into inquiries about how such research should be done, when, and when not, including within that scope the challenges, heuristics, tools and methods of designing and implementing gamification techniques (Deterding, Björk, Nacke, Dixon, & Lawley, 2013; Nacke & Deterding, 2016). This study is part of that inquiry.

FINDINGS

The "gamification" approach described here did produce an enormous amount of data, with the descriptions from the contest providing the bulk of ***31 related forum threads and 293 responses. In addition, 24 out of the 28 participating national parks completed (or mostly completed) their first drafts of the description of their park brochure using the UniD system during this training period.*** These drafts included in-situ descriptions of all sorts of media artifacts, including maps, charts, illustrations, timelines, and photographs, often showing people engaged in recreational activities or in a scenic landscape, or a combination of those, consistently reinforcing and challenging the concept of a photograph conveying a thousand words, when those words now can be counted and assessed as an equivalent experience to the original image.



Descriptathon Challenge 2: A landscape

Challenge 3: An artifact

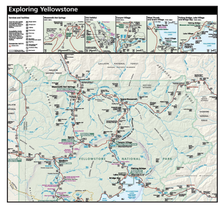
Vote recorder, 1869.

How did they do it?

Full texts at:

https://goo.gl/3nJ72h

Challenge 5: A map



Descriptathon Challenge 4: A collage

DISCUSSION

We were looking for a way to add a layer of engagement to an otherwise difficult and draining multi-day series of tasks related to translation. This "gamification" layer did, at least anecdotally, add energy to our discussions, and ***the panel of judges providing commentary on this work*** also seemed to significantly affect the overall translation quality throughout the Descriptathon.

Other thoughts worth consideration:

- A scholarly concern about gameplay is the voluntary nature of it (Huizinga, 1955). The participants in this project were volunteers, interested in improving accessibility in the National Park Service, but they also were employees of that government bureau, being paid and working on the clock, so they were not entirely participating of their own free will, raising the ***specter of an "electronic whip"*** compelling their actions (Deterding, 2014).
- Many of the participants remarked in our conference calls about how much fun they were having, how exciting this training was, and how they were eager to hear what the judges thought (and if they advanced, or not, in the competition). Because creating accessible media is not usually a competitive activity, by nature, and other activities (like driving sales of a product) might be much better aligned with productivity and quantity, using gamification in this context was both surprising and provocative to participants. ***If everything else was equal, would that lead to better (and more) audio description?***
- Gamification can be incorporated in such a process, and it can generate action and motivate participants. ***But how much? And how valuable is that motivation? And is it worth the potential costs that might demotivate a participant?***
- For our next Descriptathon, we plan to keep many of the same design features. But we also want to start pinning down some of the ideas here in more detail and with more precision. We thought gamification was an important layer to add to our project, to experiment with its potential first-hand. Now that we've seen what it can do, ***we are eager to refine our experiments*** and spend more time trying to understand how it works.

GIVE IT A TRY:

Descriptathon Challenge 1: The portrait

We gave participants this portrait, which was part of one of the National Park Service brochures (at Thomas Edison National Historical Park) that we had described in our previous Descriptathon. We also provided training about describing portraits – based on industry best practices – that recommends consideration of the subject's name, body position, attire physical features, build, hair, facial features, complexion, facial expression, ethnicity (if known and relevant), objects being held/used or in background, and the setting, including location, time of day, season and weather. ***How would you write it?***

Thomas Edison, age 14.

Describe this photo

Samples from the submissions (full texts at https://goo.gl/Grrxky):

- "This is a black and white portrait photograph of Thomas Edison at age 14. He is wearing a dark hat with a small visor brim with a braid across the front. This type of hat is often referred to as a Greek fisherman's or fiddler's hat. The hat matches his dark suit coat. He has a long, white broad tie or scarf covering his white, high neck shirt. Young Thomas Edison has a closed lip smile that spreads to his eyes. He is looking directly into the camera with confidence. His dark brown hair is close cut around the sides, allowing his ears to show. The caption is across the bottom of the photo and simply reads, Thomas Edison, age 14."
- "Aged fourteen, Thomas Edison, dressed in a knitted scarf, workman's cap, and jacket, sits with a confident half-smile on his face. His eyes reveal his precocious intelligence, maturity, and, at the same time, the burden of responsibilities he bears. He is working already. He studies at home when he can, but does not attend school. He suffers from hearing problems, but his force of personality does not let that deter him. The young man will be an inventor and businessman, and will need the toughness and resourcefulness he honed in these formative years."
- "A round faced boy, seeming closer to twelve than his fourteen years, looks back at us from a sepia toned portrait. A white scarf is wrapped high on his neck and extends down his chest in the manner of a wide cravate, showing frominently over the lepels of a dark jacket. His dark, flat topped hat is set slightly off to one side of his head, at not quite a 'jaunty' angle, as if to underscore the confidant smile on on his face. His dark hair reaches the top of his ears and, just below, his prominent chin and strong cheekbones might suggest the potential he will fulfill as a man."

... **Which one do you like best? Why? How could you craft a better description?**

ABOUT THE UNIDESCRIPTION PROJECT

In the late 1970s, designer Massimo Vignelli worked with Harpers Ferry Center staff to create the "Unigrid System," upon which all National Park Service brochures since have been based. The self-described "information architect," who also designed the innovative New York subway map, favored a modular system with a subtextual grid that facilitated order and consistency [National Park Service 2017; Vignelli 2017]. Our web-based project (www.unidescription.org) – with direct connections to Harpers Ferry, the National Park Service, those brochures, and those basic beliefs – has been called "UniD," in tribute. Our project's mantra is:

"Audio describe the world!"

Principal Investigator:

Brett Oppegaard, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor
University of Hawai'i
School of Communications
brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu, 808-956-3340
www.researchgate.net/brettoppegaard

Research Team:

UH Center on Disability Studies
Megan Conway, Ph.D., Thomas Conway, Ph.D.,
and Sajja Koirala
UH Communication and Information Sciences Ph.D. program
Philipp Jordan and Terence Jones
UH Learning Design and Technology Ph.D. program
Tuyet Hayes

Project Website:

www.unidescription.org

Research Sponsors:

University of Hawaii | National Park Service | Google | ACB

Sources:

[1] Bogost, I. (2016). Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games. New York, NY: Basic Books.
[2] Deterding, S. (2014). Eudaimonic design, or: Six invitations to rethink gamification. In M. Fuchs, S. Fizek, P. Ruffino, & N. Schrape (Eds.),Rethinking Gamification (pp. 305-331). Luneburg, Germany: Meson Press.
[3] Deterding, S., Björk, S. L., Nacke, L. E., Dixon, D., & Lawley, E. (2013). Designing gamification: creating gameful and playful experiences. Paper presented at the CHI'13 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, New York, NY.
[4] deWinter, J., & Vie, S. (2016). Games in Technical Communication. Technical Communication Quarterly, 25(3), 151-154.
[5] Huizinga, J. (1955). Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon Press.
[6] McGonigal, J. (2011). Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world. London: Penguin Books.
[7] Nacke, L. E., & Deterding, S. (2017). The maturing of gamification research. Computers in Human Behavior, 71, 450-454.
[8] Rauch, M. (2013). Best practices for using enterprise gamification to engage employees and customers. Paper presented at the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Las Vegas, NV.
[9] Walz, S. P., & Deterding, S. (2015). The gameful world: Approaches, issues, applications. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
[10] National Park Service. (2017). Retrieved Aug. 1, 2017, from https://goo.gl/8kpN7C.
[11] Massimo Vignelli. (2017). Retrieved Aug. 1, 2017, from https://goo.gl/Dd961W.