

That Game Is So Meta! An Open Source Tool for Gathering Metadata through Games

Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.

~ Jacques Derrida

A lack of quality metadata is a key problem encountered by libraries and archives as these institutions strive to ‘go digital.’ We have created Metadata Games, an open-source, customizable software system that uses computer games to collect information about archival images. As cultural institutions digitize millions of items across national collections, games offers a unique advantage for collecting metadata because they can entice users who might not normally visit archives to explore humanities content. In the process of play, participants can have fun while contributing to vital records. Crowdsourcing can produce huge numbers of new tags: for example, with just five minutes of play per day by 1,000 visitors from around the globe, thousands of tags can be produced, if we are to follow the calculations of computer scientist Luis von Ahn. Therefore, a game approach that attracts participants to a site and facilitates tagging in an enjoyable way could revolutionize the process of building and expanding an institution’s knowledge base. Players can work in a wide-scale, distributed fashion to collect much more metadata than a typical archives staff member could contribute alone in the same timeframe.

In the design of the Metadata Games project, the challenge has been to develop a software system that is able to entice participation and reward contributors for offering accurate information while at the same time providing an easy way for archivists and data managers at cultural institutions to interface with, and use, the data—all at little to no cost.

We will share design challenges and insights as well as the findings and recommendations from our pilot study, which verified the novel contributions offered by users of MG and yielded a level of output higher than other archival crowdsourcing experiments such as the Library of Congress Flickr project. We shall then discuss the technological backend that helps us manage crowdsourcing.

We’ll demonstrate three very different designs and how they work to collect data—two single-player activities and a competitive two-player game. The games all feature archival images in some way and prompt various types of descriptors from players, whether players are competing with each other, giving each other clues, or simply casually entering data to gather up points for entries. We’ll also spend time showing how players can verify each other’s entries through play and reduce errors or pranks that could disrupt the system.



We emphasize that the system, even at an early stage of development, evokes (and is informed by) critical and theoretical questions concerning collections, data, and design. In our project we endeavor to discover how games can foster a curiosity about the humanities, motivate players to delve deeper into subjects, and diversify the types of knowledge that can be crowdsourced.

Games offer great promise for humanities and archival scholarship by uniting the culture of the archive with a diverse player base, including researchers, hobbyists, and gamers.