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## All work and all play: How McIntyre Library became our campus' playful experiential learning center

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### ABSTRACT

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While playing at work may sound incongruent, many of the staff at McIntyre Library at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire seek to provide the space and opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to infuse play into any aspect of their lives. To do this, we balance the tension between being intentional with our outcomes, spaces, and programming, while providing flexibility for our users to improvise and discover what best serves their needs. After all, play is the clash of opportunity and creativity. Intrinsic to our work as librarians is a responsibility to our users; in encouraging play, both intentionally and unintentionally, our library invites users to assert themselves in a collaborative imagining of the tools, spaces, and resources we provide. By fostering an environment of playfulness, our staff strives to model and help users build skills for fun, lifelong experiential learning. In this article, we will trace McIntyre's trajectory of play over the years to its current iteration. We have refined our approach to play so that it includes staff and professional development seminars, a holistic view of wellness in how spaces in the library are structured, creating a Makerspace and Digital Studio lab, and outreach events in the hopes of making the library more accessible to students.

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### Introduction

Welcome to McIntyre Library!

[Join Game as Player 1](#)

[Join Game as Player 2](#)

#### **Player 1:**

You're a first-year student and it's the first day of your college classes. You've managed to find all your classrooms and you've just left your first class and are walking along the river walkway on campus enjoying the crisp fall day and the gorgeous view. So far, your first day is going OK... that professor seems a little wacky and you're still a bit nervous about school and making friends, but so far so good. You have a few hours

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between your classes, do you... **continue your walk** or **go to the library**?

Continue your walk:

Ok, it is a gorgeous day, fair enough. You walk down to the creek and back, but that only took a few minutes. By the library entrance you see a large fluffy white dog being petted by a group of students with a sign next to them that says “therapy dog” - ooh, you love dogs, and that one looks so soft! Also, you see that odd professor and some other students entering the library, so now you’re curious. What do you do next? **Keep walking** or **enter the library**? (Of course, you’ll stop to pet the dog, obviously.)

Keep walking:

**Congratulations, you have earned the belligerent reader achievement.** Now enter the library. You’ll like it, we promise.

Enter the Library:

You walk through the library entrance and see display cases full of objects, signs highlighting campus events, and arts and crafts made in the makerspace. Is that a mini 3D printed T-Rex skeleton? Yup. Momentarily distracted, you realize you are hearing faint drumming and electric bass guitar behind you. You turn around to face a purple wall with windows and see a couple of students playing instruments and recording in the audio studio. You quickly and casually walk onward, not staring, so no one will know you’re new here. As you pass the main desk of the library you notice a 3D printer on the desk is making something. The friendly staff person behind the desk smiles and says hello. You smile back. They ask you if you’ve heard of the library’s back-to-school party, *After Dark*. You haven’t, but anything with the word party sounds like a fun time. You’re given a flyer – free pizza, mini golf, laser tag, board games and...is that...life-sized Clue? Your inner theatre kid is freaking out. As you wander around the library you see a group playing board games by one of the large windows, a giant puzzle is tantalizingly half-finished, and a pair of students play ping-pong loudly nearby – this isn’t what you expected at all. You’re not sure what you expected, but you are pleasantly surprised as you wander around the other floors past puppets and picture books, fairy-light strewn book displays, and a workout room with exercise equipment. You peek your head into the Makerspace and are again greeted by a smiling staff person. You also explore the quiet study floors. No raucous games here, but you do notice the sweeping views of the river and campus, a student relaxation space, and a sign that informs you Special Collections and Archives is hosting an escape room tonight. Excellent, you happen to rock at escape rooms - you’ve escaped every room you’ve ever been in! You make a mental note to tell your parents you visited the library on the first day of classes as you make plans to attend **After Dark**.

**Player 2:**

You are an academic librarian headed into work. The students are back, it’s the first day of classes, and you’re happy to see campus bustling after the slow days of summer. You’ve spent the last few months preparing for the library’s annual back-to-school bonanza – *After Dark* – and you can’t wait for students to explore the library in a relaxed, fun setting later this evening. You want to make sure you have all the final details sorted out. Do you **walk by the Riverside entrance** or **enter the library**?

Riverside entrance:

You want to soak up all the sun you can get! This year, After Dark will have an outdoor component by the river. There is an open space with two fire pits and circular picnic tables for built-in seating. Above, string lights adorn the sky. Three different acapella groups are slotted to perform later this evening, and afterwards, when the sun goes down, a dance organization on campus will be teaching students to swing dance under the light from the tiny orbs above and with the glow from the fires. Students will enjoy the music and dancing while eating copious amounts of pizza. You ensure that the gas fire pits and string lights are working properly, find the 100ft extension cord, make sure there's enough trash bins for later, and then **enter the library**.

Enter the library:

You enter the library and see many students checking out the different displays and spaces the library offers. It's nice to see so many people in the building! You want to do a walk-through of the floors to ensure everything is ready to go for later. Do you **stay on the main level**, **go to the lower level**, or **go to the upper level**?

Main level:

You follow the mini golf route that just keeps going throughout the shelves on the main floor. In following the route you walk past jumbo Battleship, Jenga, chess, a blackjack table, puzzles, and lots more board games! As if all that wasn't enough, you head down to the **lower level**.

Lower level:

You take the winding stairs down to the lower level of the basement where you know in just a few hours students will be lined up for one of the main attractions of After Dark – laser tag in the stacks. The pathway for the line to form delineated, you turn to the Makerspace, a room dedicated to creators of all kinds. The Makerspace will have an open house featuring the 3D printers, laser cutting machine, power tools, sewing machines, button makers, and various art supplies available to students. You then take the elevator to the **upper level**.

Upper level:

Thank goodness for elevators! You walk around and notice the signs for Pictionary and Trivia that you're collaborating on with the Writing Center and Honors, as well as life-sized games of Chutes & Ladders and Clue! You enter Special Collections as they're locking up a few boxes to be used for the Escape Room. What's that? You see some new superhero holes for mini golf. Follow the route to the **main level** or, if you have already gotten your golf kick, **head over to your office**.

After checking all floors are ready to go for After Dark, you **go back to your office**...you have some very important pizza confirmations to make.

**Congratulations, you just earned the Prepared to Party achievement.** You can't wait for the fun to begin at **After Dark**.

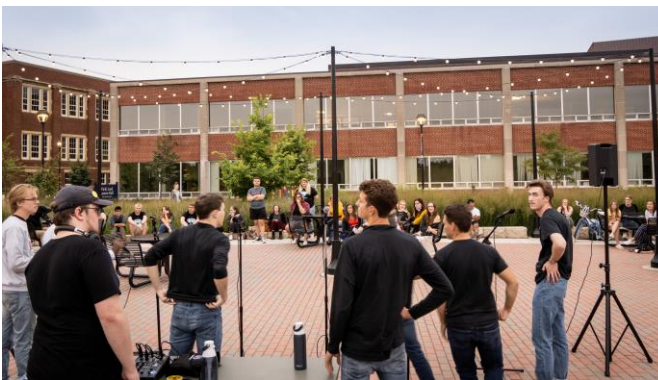
After Dark:

A new student and a librarian's day converge at the life-size Clue game. The librarian encourages the student to don a goofy costume and join some new peers in this playful pastime. Together they laugh, ridiculous

pictures are taken, some memories are made and maybe even some friends. Tomorrow they'll both be back in the library, and who know what they'll do then.

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While they might not all occur in a single day, the events above are all activities and programs that we have incorporated into our outreach and programming on a recurring basis. After Dark is a real event – one big celebration of play entwined with learning. We believe that play can be radical, informative, and allow for perspective-taking and accessibility to spaces for everyone. In this paper, we will be discussing the various, and occasionally contradictory, definitions of play – settling on our own definition for structure and clarity, but recognizing the nuances play takes in different libraries and workplace settings. The essence of play is that given the proper tools and conditions, it can arise organically at any point in our work. While throughout this paper we will be discussing the evolving nature of how McIntyre Library has engaged our students and staff through various pedagogical approaches, spaces, and tools, our beginnings in incorporating play could be categorized by experimentation and trial and error. We did not have an end point or plan in mind – we simply wanted to engage our students and ourselves in a different manner. Which is all to say that playful libraries can spring up anywhere.



*Acapella groups performing to a gathering of students.*



*A heated game of Clue in action.*

## **What play and playfulness mean to us**

Attempting to define a broad concept such as play may at first glance appear to take away the charm and spontaneity many come to associate with play. While Stuart Brown (2009) eventually gives the term a definition, he notes, "I hate to define play because it is a thing of beauty best appreciated by experiencing it. Defining play has always seemed to me like explaining a joke – analyzing it takes all the joy out of it." Whole

books, such as Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*, discuss the nuances that go into defining the amorphous term. While we are not interested in providing a fixed definition – our definition may be entirely different by the time you read this article – for our purposes, play will be loosely defined as an engaging activity that brings a person joy, calm, or happiness.

### *Play vs. Playfulness*

While play can be considered a very personal experience and by its nature difficult to measure, we believe that certain conditions can be curated to encourage play. This is captured in the idea of bringing an affect of play, or playfulness, towards certain activities. We borrow this from Miguel Sicart (2014), who describes playfulness as an attitude that people can bring to any activity or in life. Therefore, the difference between play and playfulness is the difference between swimming in an ocean and the ocean itself – bringing a playful mindset to any situation engenders the conditions for play but does not necessarily constitute play in and of itself.

In distinguishing between play and playfulness, we strive to create spaces primed for play. While certainly not exhaustive, the conditions that can affect play can include any of the following: personal level of comfort, other individuals' involvement and enthusiasm, preparation in setting the stage, ground rules, space that feels open to any activity, and approachable staff. It is these conditions that our library seeks to cultivate in our programming, instruction, and outreach.

### **What is the purpose of play in the library? How does the library function as a playful space?**

To examine the role of play in libraries, we must examine the role of libraries. Libraries are changing. Traditionally, libraries have been seen as spaces of information storage and retrieval. With the advent of technology and computers that fit in the palm of our hands, we are seeing more users find their information quickly online than in print materials. In the last 20 years or so, academic libraries like our mid-sized, public institution in the United States are investing more of their budget into electronic resources than print copies of titles. While libraries will always advocate for the democratization of information and work to fill users' traditional needs, many academic libraries have reworked their spaces due to the shift from print to e-resources (Baril & Kobiela, 2017). Much more than offering books and computers, academic libraries like ours are reimagining our spaces to respond to users' needs more holistically.

It is in this context that we have found ourselves reflecting on the changes that we have made to help align ourselves to our users' needs. Our mission statement is brief and gets to the core of our decision-making

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process: “We foster learning and collaboration through our spaces, services, people, and resources” (“Mission”, n.d.). Rather than viewing academic libraries as gatekeepers of information and places where strict “academic” learning occurs, we have expanded it to include collaboration, an important skill in our ever-connected world. Both learning and collaboration are enriched in the context of play, which helps foster and build empathy, listen, and experiment with different perspectives (Mardell et al., 2016). These are important skills that young adults are developing that would serve them well beyond academia.

It is well documented in the Information Sciences literature that college students experience library anxiety and find academic libraries intimidating and overwhelming (McPherson, 2015; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004). In thinking through the arguments for infusing play into potentially daunting spaces like academic libraries, we align ourselves with bodies of work that not only show the benefits of play in developing important life skills and learning, but we also create opportunities to make the library more accessible to students so they will turn to us and our resources when the need arises. That said, when we took our first steps as a library towards games and gaming over a decade ago, we did not consult this body of research, nor did we have an overarching plan in mind. We simply had the goal of wanting to provide students some space for taking a study break and decompressing, while paradoxically dispelling the myth of a quiet library. Through years of developing spaces that complement noise levels on each floor, we have since accomplished these goals. Our main level is home to a ping-pong table and our board game collection. As one moves higher on the floors, the spaces get quieter. The goal is for our library spaces to continue to be used in fostering community and to allow for creativity where people can connect with like-minded users.

To offer spaces and communities of play also necessitates designated spaces for privacy and rest. Andrew Walsh (2019), in the process of identifying play enablers, discusses space and environmental cues. While ostensibly playful spaces like makerspaces are mentioned, a need for privacy to paradoxically encourage play is important as well. Libraries have always had carrels and study rooms made available to students, but in recent years we have converted much more of our space to individual study rooms with checkout keys. Students can use the spaces however they wish – interviewing, napping, collaborating with peers, the list is long. In his TED talk, Tim Brown (2008) argues that kids who are most secure feel most free to play – it's not a new concept, but as library professionals we are constantly assessing how our students are engaging in our spaces, who is included and who is not, and how we can strive to remove barriers that we may not have realized exist that are preventing our library users from fully utilizing our building. In addition to private study rooms and carrels,

we have collaborated with the Psychology department in recent years to offer a space in the library called the Rest Nest with features such as therapy lights, chair massage cushions, foam, kinetic sand, and much more. It is an accessible place where students can relax and destress.

These reimagining of spaces have also allowed us to reimagine our role as librarians as more than guides to information. We are also playful instructors, teaching students how to evaluate the information they find through a variety of pedagogical methods; we offer technological assistance to students working on their podcasts, laser engraving, or photography projects; we are collaborators, taking users' suggestions of our spaces, games, and collections and building them into reality. By embracing play in our library over the years, we have created the space to be ever more responsive to our users and have therefore expanded the role of our library at our institution. It is important to qualify, however, that residing in an institution of higher education, there are difficulties faced when combining work with play.

### **Challenges to play in an academic library & the false 'Play vs. Work' dichotomy**

Higher education is typically seen as a serious place of study. The high stakes of college success are often compounded by the financial burdens it places on families and students' end goal of finding employment after graduation. If university employees deviate too much from the stoic learning environment commonly projected onto higher education, they may be met with resistance in the form of, "Is this how my/my kid's tuition dollars are being spent?" In our western capitalist society, being seen anything other than 'productive,' especially in a higher education setting, becomes synonymous with not taking one's education seriously, of wasting time, and of having a poor work ethic (Walsh, 2019). Play is often unpredictable, loud, messy and challenging of authority (Mardell et al., 2016). These qualities are frequently seen as at odds with traditional perceptions of universities and especially academic libraries. Therefore, higher education demands theoretical justifications of infusing play into library programming and university curriculum. Often the justification for play is the proven benefits for learning and teaching, the justification that play *is* in fact productive. Piaget stated that the purpose of curiosity and play was to "construct knowledge" through interactions with the world (1945). Play is crucial for human intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development (Mardell et al., 2016). We know play is valuable from the abundant evidence supporting games as effective teaching tools and the benefits of experiential learning. We also see evidence in our own experiences that play can be a good in and of itself, not only as a means to productive ends. We challenge the notion that academic libraries should only encourage play out of the necessity of learning, and we are actively trying to dismantle what we see as a false dichotomy of

work and play.

We notice that in many professional and academic settings work is approached as separate from or even contrary to play. Work is the spending of mental and/or physical effort to accomplish some goal. It also can be seen as a place where one labors and is compensated. Because work has so many weighty connotations, it is easy to contrast it to play, which is often viewed as not important, serious, or worthwhile. We feel that it is not as simple as that; a spectrum better captures their relationship. When discussing the idea of play at work, we have noticed a tendency of people to distance their work from play, so our efforts in our library strive to normalize the idea that play also has value and importance. When we say we play at work, we are not minimizing or denigrating these efforts, but hopefully championing a new more holistic view of what work can be. As Sicart writes, "I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them. It is a way of being in the world" (2014, p. 3). Play is of value to students and academic librarians, even if not directly linked to a learning objective or academic outcome. As librarians, for the simple joy of playing, or for the goal of being well-rounded people who delight in our lives (and our work), we should encourage and foster play widely beyond the classroom.

### **People, places, and programs at our library that encourage playfulness**

#### ***Games Collection – Starting small and building playfulness piece-by-piece***

McIntyre Library began to dabble in play through games in 2009 when we were awarded a small grant. The grant got us games including a chess set and board games that were left out for students to use at their leisure. Our games, and thus the spaces for play and playfulness, were beginning to take hold. The following year, we decided to add a mini golf course as part of our student welcome event, which later evolved into After Dark. This event was meant to make students see the library as a comfortable, fun, and welcoming space and see library staff as friendly and non-intimidating. As time went on, however, we quickly realized the impact that this was having not only on students, but on staff as well. Each summer, our staff is invited to gather and spend some time planning, mending, building, and setting up equipment and games necessary for that year's After Dark. It is a great creative and bonding endeavor where play is strongly encouraged.

Our success with board games at After Dark have inspired student groups to reach out and use our space for gaming in various ways. For example, we have collaborated with a student organization to host board games in the library as an alternative activity to lunch during Ramadan. Additionally, in holding monthly game days and



gaming events students restarted a game club on campus, using the library's game collection and spaces for their meetings. Oftentimes, any leftover games that resulted from these meetings were donated to the library, thereby expanding our gaming collection even more.

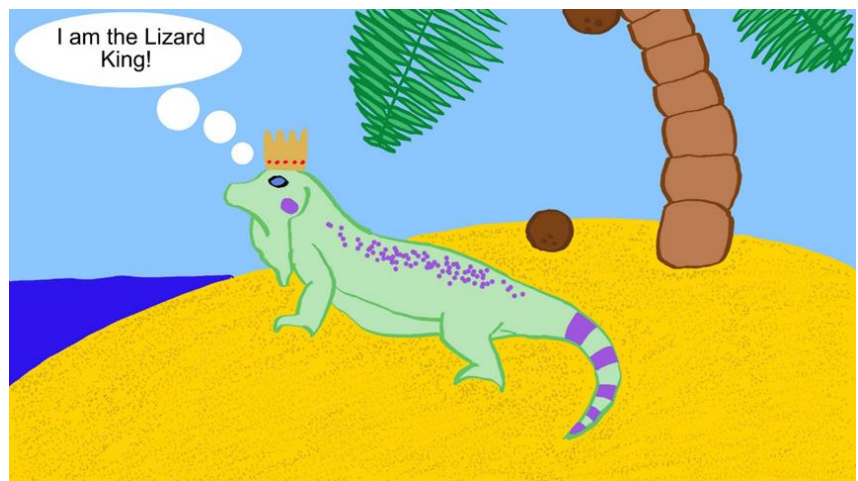
Departments have also noticed play in the library and have contacted us to collaborate with them. We were initially approached by staff in our international education department with the idea of providing games that might assist international students in practicing English language skills. Through a grant provided by the requesting office, we were able to purchase games useful for English language learners and have seen the games used each year by various groups of students. A few years later, our Council on Internationalization and Global Engagement approached us to collaborate on hosting a backgammon tournament for the community. Having hosted teaching sessions before the tournament began, this event was popular enough that it became an annual event until the onslaught of Covid-19.

#### *Professional Development and Staff/Faculty Play*

One area where we have expanded play in the workplace is during our professional development and training for our staff and faculty colleagues. Often, work training is seen as obligatory and serious, but we recognize the benefits of play not only to facilitate learning but to encourage teamwork and creativity among peers. Librarians organize a yearly introduction session for new faculty at our university. This could have been presented as an informational PowerPoint (and an exercise in boredom for our newest colleagues), but we knew we wanted people to interact and play with us and their new faculty peers. With inspiration from an improv game, we created a custom deck of cards for teams to play with during this session. Each card deck had 2 colored "suits" of library services/resources and projects. These were inspiration cards, and the teams were encouraged to write down a potential learning outcome from their course and use the cards in creative combinations to achieve their outcomes. They could collaborate on one outcome or help each other with many. There were no right or wrong combinations; we just asked them to explain what they came up with in the end. The free-form nature of this activity fell somewhere between a brainstorming session and a game, and we were happy to let the faculty approach it seriously or playfully. It was interesting to observe how the most playful groups often arrived at the most innovative and exciting combinations. Sometimes a piano, an annotated bibliography, and a consultation with a librarian could combine to inspire the funniest assignment ideas that would realistically be great learning experiences for students. We envisioned this game to showcase library resources that new faculty members might not yet be aware of (such as our makerspace and digital studios, or unique collections and services) and to

promote creative alternatives to the traditional research project (like video, music, podcasting, and artistic projects). However, this game also provided an icebreaker for new faculty; they were introducing themselves and chatting about their subjects and classes even while they were experimenting and laughing about unconventional card combinations.

Within the library we also take a playful approach to training activities for fellow staff whenever we can. For the past few years, we have organized a library summer conference for library staff, also open to staff around campus, where we teach each other fun and playful things – showcasing and sharing staff talents beyond our traditional work roles. For example, staff have taught sessions on painting, martial arts, dance, electronics projects, hiking, and improv. This is a fun opportunity for us to play as a team but also appreciate some of the many facets of our colleagues' personalities and lives beyond the library. We have also started a summer party to edit online guides – the work is something librarians previously did in isolation with little collaboration, and this party offers us a change to creatively brainstorm improvements to our online guides as a group and take a break together with lunch and a game of ladderball or kubb outside. Another example of playful staff training was when we launched the digital studio. We found that we had new equipment that staff needed to familiarize themselves with, but that the task was languishing on many of our work to-do lists. To make this a little less daunting (after all, our digital studio rooms and technology are intended to be fun places for students to play around and experiment with technology rather than feel intimidated by it) we decided to make our staff training into more of a game. One librarian created a “Training the Trainers” online guide that was a space open to contribution and where we posted fun challenges that would involve using the space and technology in creative ways.



*A staff member's digital drawing for a "training the trainers" prompt to include a reptile and a thought bubble*

In addition to our internal professional development sessions, we also hosted a Games in Libraries Conference here at our library in the summer of 2019. Librarians proposed, planned, and held the conference here to bring together librarians from public and academic libraries around the state and region to talk about games and gaming in libraries. Presenters for the conference came from all types of libraries and talked about a large variety of topics from creating a games collection to hosting game events to programs for making and designing games. The conference was a fun opportunity to open our space to the wider gaming-in-libraries community and foster the free exchange of inspiration and networking among professionals interested in this growing field.

### *Creative Innovation Spaces (Makerspace & Digital Studio)*

In the past few years our library has repurposed old spaces into creative places for play. In keeping with a workplace culture of experimentation, we launched a makerspace in what was previously a staff lounge. Our staff and students were excited at the prospect of sharing tools, materials, expertise, and building a “maker” community where people from around campus would be welcome to create and play with their hands. Our makerspace is stocked with arts and crafts supplies, tools for electronics, 3D printers and a laser cutter – we acquired materials through donations and grants and the space was first staffed by a team of library staff who were interested and now includes dedicated student employees as well. We've seen our students make amazing things in the makerspace, sometimes for school, but more often for themselves, as a gift, or simply for the joy of making an idea a reality. Our staff hold workshops in the makerspace which allow students to connect and form community with peers but also potentially discover new hobbies. These are also a fun creative outlet for employees who can teach and share their skills and interests. We have also had several classes from our university come to play and learn in this space. Some art, science, and math classes have gotten creative with modeling, 3D printing, and laser cutting. But we also encourage ourselves and faculty to get creative with how we can play around with the materials in the makerspace for all sorts of experiential learning in any subject. For example, our French and ESL classes have come and librarians have led craft workshops and team challenges that turn making and communicating into games that just happen to be in a second language for students. These are fun team activities for students and instructors alike and encourage students to be spontaneous and playful in a classroom-outside-of-the-classroom setting.

Shortly after launching our Makerspace, the library also re-envisioned another portion of our space to create the Digital Studios and Digital Studio Commons area – we already had 2 small rooms dedicated to VR and podcasting, but new funding allowed us to upgrade these rooms and add a larger audio studio and photo/video

studio. We also upgraded computers with hardware and software for digital media creation projects and created an open “commons” space with group and individual workstations and staffing help to make these playful studios more inviting and usable to all. Since opening these spaces to students we have seen individuals and groups start jam sessions, take studio portraits, start podcasts, and play VR games. These places aren’t intended just for coursework. They are meant to be played in, and students are making the most of their new high-tech toys. We held an open house to launch this upgraded space where every part of the studio had a game or interactive hands-on opportunity where staff encouraged participation. Students laughed at their own mock-podcasts, took teddy bear mugshots, drew a collaborative artwork (or chaotic doodlescape), and recorded and rerecorded so many versions of *Heart and Soul*.

Our creative spaces offer room and technology for students to work on school projects and build skills, but beyond that we knew that offering places like this contribute to student and staff wellness. We know that we need to take a holistic approach to recognizing students and staff as humans with creative interests and hobbies and the desire to play and we hope they see the library as a place that facilitates that.

### *Teaching*

As librarians who have teaching responsibilities, we can confidently state that some of our most engaging and playful lessons come about through the relationships and discussions that we have had with campus partners. A discussion with faculty members about play prompted one of our business faculty to ask if any games could be used in an international leadership course. We collaborated to create a course assignment where students came to the library to play the cooperative games *Pandemic* and *Forbidden Island* to practice and reflect on team leadership. After playing the game, the students would discuss the experience – what went well and what could be improved – and oftentimes replay the game.

In addition to collaborations that have sprouted as a result of being more intentional about play, long-standing instruction collaboration occurs each semester between the library and first-year instructors. We offer courses that introduce first-year and transfer students to college life and promote tools and research strategies that help them succeed throughout their years here. Instructors from these courses often turn to the library to lead a single class session, or one-shot, wherein we introduce students to many of the library’s resources that they may need to help them succeed in their coursework. In the past year, a group of us revamped this lesson plan to be more playful and engaging for students. We made most of the one-shot a scavenger hunt where students would

take a photo at a specific location in the library they would eventually need to utilize (such as a librarian's office, the makerspace, equipment checkout, or book checkout), and then upload the photo to an online platform so the rest of the class could view it when they came back and presented. This approach not only made the class livelier, but it also helped students retain the information due to kinesthetic learning (Chisholm & Spencer, 2017; Kuczala, 2015). Additionally, students were hearing and learning about the other locations in the scavenger hunt from their fellow peers – which tends to be more memorable than an instructor's lecture. We encouraged the students to be as silly and playful as they felt comfortable being in their photos, and some groups have really delivered!



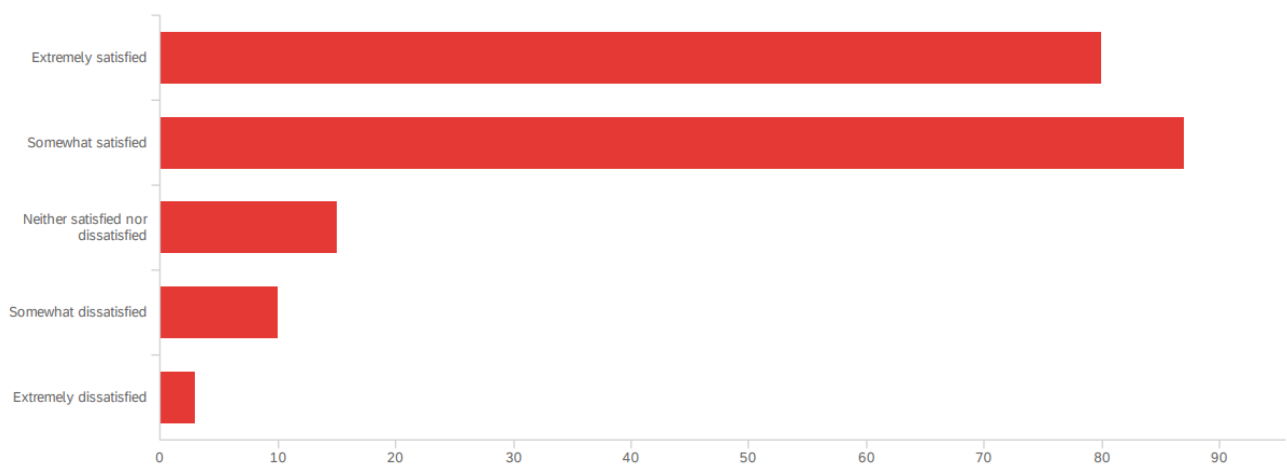
*A few example screenshots that student groups have uploaded during their scavenger hunt.*

### ***Programming/Outreach***

While programming and outreach provide ample opportunities for play, certain programs are worth mentioning. In the spirit of reaching students wherever they are at, we often bring library materials out of the building to our students and our campus community. These outreach opportunities allow students to check out materials anywhere and connect with librarians and staff in informal, fun settings. The additional comfort

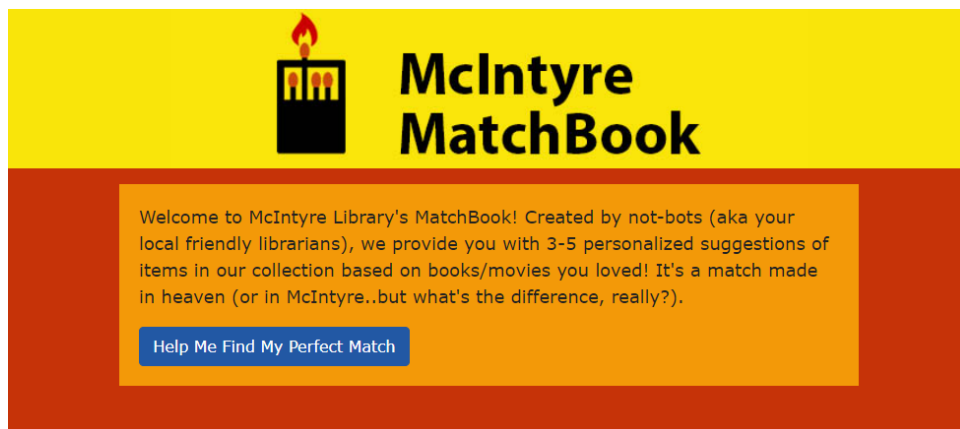
provided in bringing the library to a location a student is familiar with, such as the Gender and Sexualities Resources Center, allows for more playful interactions. At these pop-up events we not only bring materials from our collections, but button-making supplies from our makerspace. During National Coming Out Week, we made Pride buttons, eliciting responses from students like, “See, this is why the library is the best,” demonstrating opportunities to create positive perceptions of the library. These crafts serve a dual purpose as we measure student engagement through number of buttons made (for example), books checked out, and in-person interactions with librarians. For larger, annual events like After Dark, we collect attendance numbers through card swipes and solicit student feedback and engagement by sending out a survey to all attendees.

#### Q4 - Thinking about your experience at After Dark are you



*From the 195 respondents to this question in our 2020 After Dark survey – 85% of participants were either extremely or somewhat satisfied with the event.*

Another service in which librarians connect on an individual level with students is our McIntyre Matchbook program. This reader advisory service is available through an online form, making it accessible to distance learners. Students supply a book or movie that they liked and genres they enjoy, and we match them with 3-5 additional books and movies. We have peppered thematic puns throughout the form to make the process more engaging for students. We also value students’ feedback so we made a form asking them to select the appropriate number of fire emojis that best describes their satisfaction: Blazing, Good, Fair, or Poor. One response from a student was, “I would ... like to say that this matchbook thing is SO cool and I am now obsessed.”



*The welcome page to McIntyre Matchbook.*

While these playful programs do demand staff time and energy, we find that because they are often enjoyable opportunities to connect with students and each other, they can also offer invigorating and inspiring breaks from more routine tasks. We recognize that additional social/emotional labor can contribute to staff burnout, so we try to distribute this load as a team rather than putting it on one staff member's plate exclusively, and we step in frequently to support or sub for each other as needed. So while we agree that mindfulness of workload is important, we also find that voluntary opportunities to engage in play can combat boredom and disengagement with work.

We also need to be constantly mindful of how our playful programming can be made more inclusive. Many of our programs are in-person events, but we are also working to extend opportunities for play and connection with librarians for distance students (for example, with an online orientation that encourages students to ask librarians a funny riddle through chat) or students with disabilities (through modified and more accessible mini-golf, or games that are accessible for students of all abilities). We are constantly open to feedback and strive to reflect after our programming, asking, "For whom did that work and for whom did it fail, and how can we do better for everyone?" While we acknowledge that our accessibility and inclusivity is constrained in certain ways by our building and campus environment, we are advocating to improve these conditions, and often our playful programs are the spark that help us recognize the need for changes.

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## Conclusion

Our library may not have intentionally set out to become a hub for play and playfulness on our campus, but upon reflection it seems to be something we have fostered over the years and continue to value in our future. We began to invite play into our library with a chessboard and puzzles, and we have been surprised and delighted by what people have brought to the table in return. Through adding more playful events, we have welcomed users into our spaces for whatever they needed – not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. We try to avoid rigid expectations for those interacting with our materials and spaces, keeping an open mind to see how people want to play and create a playful community. In doing so, we are constantly striving to make our playful library more accessible and welcoming to all and we are learning from users as we go. We know having a playful attitude won't mean all our efforts and experiments work out, that's part of the process, but it will allow us to embrace and persevere through failure and revel in the unpredictable rewards and joys of a playful library. As we look back on our progress and towards goals for the future, we see staff and students laughing and trying new things, encouraging and inviting each other to enjoy themselves in the library, and imagining what might be.

In modelling play and opening space for play to our library users, we at McIntyre Library have chosen to engage with the slipperiness of the term and its many possibilities for learning, fun, and collaboration. Bringing a playful attitude toward work may be informal, but it is certainly not unprofessional, and the difference between the two could mean the difference in engagement of users, especially in a service-oriented field where user input and involvement is critical. Inviting play in your library can lead to dangerous activities such as creative thinking, perspective taking, and broader, sustained connections. So we ask: what are you waiting for?

### What happens next?

**Path 1:** We will keep trying new things and reflecting on them to see how useful they are for our users – putting effort into the things that work well, setting aside projects that do not work as lessons learned. Roll for initiative.

**Path 2:** All roads lead to **Path 1**. Congratulations, you have earned the imagining the multiverse achievement.



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## Author Bios

**Liliana** has always been a lover of libraries, books, and wordplay. While various family members may have independently diagnosed her with *Witzelsucht* - a compulsive tendency to make puns - as soon as they found out this term existed, she prefers to see this as a high compliment. She uses her punderful powers for good to bring her coworkers untold joy (or provoke gagging emojis in online meetings). While she serves as McIntyre Library's Digital Learning and Instruction Librarian, she has also awarded herself the honorary titles of Tutorial Whisperer, Digital Studio Executive, and Popular Fiction "af-fiction-ado." In her free time, Liliana enjoys crossword dueling and the trivial pursuit of happiness.

**Helena** has taken up Wordle (and its many iterations) like the rest of the planet and is amazed at the camaraderie exhibited by all players: the unspoken rule that thy shall not prematurely reveal the *word*. Speaking of, today's word is \*\*\*\*\*. By the time you see this, Helena will have either completed her 100-day Wordle streak or she will be inconsolable. Either way, she's proud to contribute to what will undoubtedly be the DSM-VI's newest addiction subcategory. She justifies this behavior under professional development in her role as Student Engagement Librarian.

## Hans

While all our staff contribute to the work of bringing playfulness to our library, is there a ringleader? We do not like to point fingers, but we will. However, we will try to protect the identity of this individual by calling him Zippy the circus clown. Now, Zippy joined the staff of our library in 2008, and has a lifelong relationship with play and trying to stay playful. To look at his early academic career would lead most to the conclusion that he would not even make it as a circus clown. However, according to his mother, once he found AD&D (Dungeons and Dragons) everything changed for him, and he actually started learning in school. Looking back, one could point to that as being Hans finding his spark, or as Ken Robinson (2009) called it, "the element," which is the bringing together of one's passion and talent. Play and playfulness are how Hans....err I mean Zippy, learns and he tries to bring that attitude or way of being to everyone around him. Playing is a way of learning, and Zippy tries to find ways to bring that into every aspect of his life. Hans often says that work is a four-letter word (he also uses way too many other words like that) in many of the courses he teaches; however, approaching work (learning) with a playful attitude can help with adding in fun to work. This idea is one that Zippy has tried to encourage and remember throughout his childhood. No one has ever said that he is or acts like a grown up.