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Collecting Cats: Library Lessons from Neko Atsume

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This blog post is the culmination of a [Twitter conversation](#) between librarians talking about their experiences playing a phone game. The game is called Nekoatsume and it involves taking care of digital cats in a virtual backyard. Nekoatsume is entirely in Japanese, a key fact that actually started the Twitter conversation (and not the fact that the game involves cats, as might be expected).

In short: a librarian started playing a game, wrote some enticing tweets, and many more librarians joined in — and still are to this day.

While this was happening, Kelly wrote on her personal blog about the joy & ease of understanding the game despite its language barriers, and how it would be nice if students felt the same way about using databases and library resources. Library databases *should* be just as user-friendly as a game in a foreign language, but too often they're not. Our students do use recreational technology, and Nekoatsume isn't the first app in Japanese or Chinese to gain popularity in the U.S. in the last month. And it's not that recreational technology is always user-friendly, either. Torrenting platforms, such as the Pirate Bay, are notoriously convoluted — especially in regards to persistent content — but anecdotal evidence suggests that our students are able to navigate these platforms with relative ease.¹



As more and more librarians join in to play Nekoatsume, there's a common experience that happens early on: the digital cats have disappeared — maybe they died, or ran away — and we believe that we've played the game wrong.



¹ This statement is not an endorsement for downloading torrents.

Megan even initially deleted the app out of frustration. The experience of not understanding phone cats, even when “everyone else” seemed to, left her in a position that many of our students might find themselves: lost, stupid, and unwilling to engage any further. Sadly, library resources do not contain cute digital cats to lure users back after a bad experience. Megan, on the other hand, was willing to give Nekoatsume another shot after the Twitter conversation, and she also found a walk-through for the game online.

The satisfaction from playing Nekoatsume comes from getting more & more cats, and more & more points. For library resources the outcome is often much less immediate: find resources, analyze evidence, fill a resource quota for a bibliography. The research process can also be very solitary, and having the ability to apply similar or shared experience can counteract that as well as other obstacles with online library resources. That is to say, having a related experience can help the process to feel seamless, less daunting. In the case of Nekoatsume, the language barrier subsides once the basic movements of the game are understood, whether through trial and error, consultation of the Twitter hive-mind, or reading online tutorials. Such resources are comparable to “cheat codes” in the gaming world, elements that facilitate getting to the next achievement level. In the library world, they are often referred to as “threshold concepts”. And while most online library resources do contain the same basic functionalities, such as as a button for “Search” and and a link for “Full-Text”, differences from platform to platform in placement and style contribute to a block in fulfilling that need for seamless usability.

Libraries do make a great effort to provide users with workshops, tutorials, and LibGuides to facilitate user understanding and research methods. However, such content can require a lot of explanation whether with words, pictures, live demonstrations, or a mix of all three. Sometimes it can feel like tutorials need their own tutorials! Discovery layers, such as Summon and Primo, begin to address the usability issue by providing a single destination for discovery, but with that libraries still need to address issues of demonstrating research purpose, enthusiasm, and information synthesis. With so many variables in acquiring research — design, functionality, search queries, tutorials — the outcome of research can be overshadowed by the multitude of platform interfaces, both within the library and on the open Web.

The hype for Nekoatsume may eventually subside (or not), but another app will likely take its place and we librarians will still be asking ourselves how to facilitate the next steps of scholarly research for our students. If we can find a way to foster essential research skills by relating them to similar experiences — like with social media, searching on the open Web, downloading torrents, and playing games with digital cats — perhaps the process to knowledge can feel less daunting.

...but maybe we *should* just embed cute cats into all things digital.