



A Game for Exploring Asian Cultures

By Leslie Swartz

A criminal mastermind known as the FOX has been stealing important cultural landmarks and objects all across Asia. Searches for him have proven fruitless since his identity is a mystery. What the FOX doesn't know is that teen bloggers from four Asian countries have teamed up to bring him to justice. Meet the League of Extraordinary Bloggers, AKA the LXB!

You are Agent X, honorary fifth member of the LXB. You will be helping the fab four track down the FOX. Fly to each LXB member's home country to investigate clues left behind by the Fox.

Think you can help crack this case, Agent X? Pack your bag and get ready!



Apps are a quandary for educators and parents: are they mindless distractions with little intrinsic value or educational tools that build curiosity and persistence, and bridge informal and formal learning? Clearly mobile game applications are magnetic. Applying game theory to educational apps with motivational challenges and rewards seems like an intriguing and potentially productive format for expanding interest, knowledge, and understanding in learning about Asia.

As part of the Freeman Foundation Asian Culture Exhibit Series (FFACES), Boston Children's Museum created the exhibition *Children of Hangzhou: Connecting with China*. Funded by the Freeman Foundation, five children's museums each produced a traveling exhibit focused on China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam. Each exhibit will travel to a minimum of eight additional children's museums—at least forty-five venues total—reaching more than two million visitors.

This is the second time that the Freeman Foundation has partnered with the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) to invest in children's museums to introduce Asian cultures to children and their adult companions. Based on extensive international scientific and economic research, much attention is now focused on cross-domain learning needs of children long before they enter school." Laura Huerta Migus, ACM's executive director, notes:

Children's museums, which serve more than thirty-one million visitors per year, have the expertise to design and deliver innovative, memorable, and developmentally appropriate educational experiences that support children and families learning about other cultures. The support of the Freeman Foundation acknowledges the evidence indicating that the time to spark interest in learning about Asia begins at a young age.

In addition to the exhibit, Boston Children's Museum's FFACES proposal included the creation of The League of Extraordinary Bloggers

mobile application, a pioneering approach to connecting visitors with a broad realm of resources for exploring Asian cultures. LXB uses humor, mystery, and a strong storyline to engage children in learning more about Asia to build on visiting the FFACES exhibit, or as a standalone game app for literally anyone, anywhere.

The app is available for free download for Apple and Android products or online at <http://www.lxbgame.com/>.

Modeled roughly on the highly popular "Where in the World Is Carmen San Diego," LXB is about solving a mystery. In the course of the game and by reading the kids' blogs, users gather interesting information about each of the four countries.

Geography: Regional and country maps are a strong feature of the game. Users gain a sense of the size of each country, where they are in relation to one another, and key geographic facts about each country.

Cultural Icons: While searching for clues, users explore the ancient and contemporary highlights of each capital city.

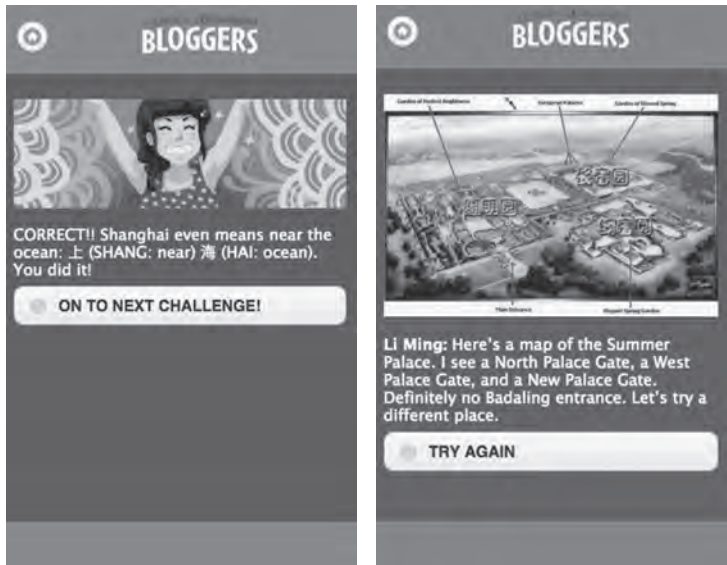
Languages: All the agents teach how to read numbers in their own languages. Additional language lessons include reading Chinese characters for major cities, Korean symbols on their flag, and more.

Math and Currency: Learning about currency is done through a game in which the user calculates converting the local money into US dollars.



Sample geography question.

The LXB bloggers all use humor, slang, and their intimate knowledge of pop icons to introduce the youth haunts of the capital.



Sample screens from the online app.



Sample city tour page.

Visual Learning: The combination of illustrations with photographs makes the exploration of the cities particularly intriguing and memorable.

Agent X (AKA the user) gathers information and takes several playful quizzes that cumulatively lead to more clues, while also presenting many distinguishing characteristics of each country. Taken as an exploration of East Asia, the LXB game is intended to help dispel misconceptions of Asia as a monolithic entity.

The characters, content, and design combine to reduce stereotypes of kids in each country. There are four teen agents, one from each

country, and together with the user, they attempt to find the FOX. Each of the four bloggers has a distinct personality type, as is commonly used in kid and teen entertainment, putting together the “smart one,” the “rebel,” the “leader,” and the “joker.” Think of the Scooby Doo gang, Captain Planet, The Beatles, or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. It is a device that is familiar and understandable to the audience, making the use accessible and clear, as is essential to good apps.

The LXB app looks hip, cool, and appealing. Advisers, evaluators, and kids helped choose the design, preferring the hip factor to a more traditional or cute look. The manga-style artwork features a trendy aesthetic that works across China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam. The LXB bloggers all use humor, slang, and their intimate knowledge of pop icons to introduce the youth haunts of the capital. At the same time, they are appropriately respectful of traditions and carefully explain cultural norms and practices to Agent X.

Feedback to date indicates that kids enjoy the app and are intrigued by the content. Many adults have played with their children and are equally intrigued by learning new facts. Additional evaluation is underway as the app is introduced through the FFACES exhibits. Use of the LXB has been growing steadily since its launch early in 2015. To date, usage has concentrated in the US, but it has also been downloaded in Asia and other parts of the world. Based on feedback, Boston Children’s Museum, with support from the Harvard University Asia Center, will develop additional app elements in the coming year

How, then, do educators and parents evaluate the learning potential of an app? Or, as psychologist Roberta Golnikoff writes, “Let’s put the educational back in ‘educational media.’” Many educators believe children of all ages learn best when they are active and engaged with information that is meaningful and intriguing to them. In the LXB app, Boston Children’s Museum has applied lessons learned from successful cultural exhibits and applied them to digital media, with kid-to-kid communication as the key ingredient. Please see the sidebar to the left for more information on this topic.

What to look for in digital media:

1. Look for tools and media that encourage parents to be involved in their child’s progress, participate in activities/dialogue, and play along.
2. Look for tools that draw direct connections to current classroom curriculum.
3. Look for content that sparks curiosity in the world outside.
4. Consider the media’s source.
5. For more information, see <http://tinyurl.com/9bkve8>.



Boston Children's Museum. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/p46teud>.

About Boston Children's Museum

Since its founding over 100 years ago, Boston Children's Museum has offered a rich array of programs on Asia. Boston Children's Museum's Asia programs provide interactive learning programs for families, educators, and students of all ages, including:

- Innovative curriculum
- Exhibits
- Professional development for educators
- Print, media, and digital publications
- Museum-wide cultural festivals

In partnership with Harvard University's Asia Center, Boston Children's Museum offers a unique combination of scholarship and engaging informal learning through interaction with real objects, interesting people, and dynamic media.

Boston Children's Museum engages children and families in joyful discovery experiences that instill an appreciation of our world, develop foundational skills, and spark a lifelong love of learning. More information about Boston Children's Museum can be found at www.BostonChildrens-Museum.org. Become a fan of the Museum on Facebook and follow them on Twitter.

About the Freeman Foundation

The Freeman Foundation was established in 1993 by Mansfield Freeman. This private foundation is committed to increasing and strengthening the understanding of nations in East Asia.

About The Association of Children's Museums (ACM)

In an increasingly complex world, children's museums provide a place where all kids can learn through play and exploration with the caring adults in their lives. There are approximately 400 children's museums around the world, which annually reach more than thirty-one million visitors. ACM provides leadership, professional development, advocacy, and resources for its member organizations and individuals. To learn more about ACM and to find an ACM member children's museum near you, visit www.childrensmuseums.org. ■

LESLIE SWARTZ, as Senior Vice President for Research and Program Planning for Boston Children's Museum, is responsible for research and evaluation, strategic planning, long-range exhibition and program planning, and funding strategies for programs, exhibitions and new initiatives. Over her long tenure at Boston Children's Museum, she has directed the exhibition, education, community outreach, East Asian, and curriculum and professional development departments, as well as publications. Swartz also directs the Harvard East Asian Outreach Program, which offers professional development, curricula, and public programs focused on Japan and China.



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