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# **The Gamification of Genealogy: Potential Impact on Participation in Family History**

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## **Extended Abstract**

The internet has enabled tens of millions of people worldwide to more fully engage in genealogy research. Early web sites like Rootsweb.com, Ancestry.com, and Genforum.com enabled researchers to locate records and collaborate in family history like never before, minimizing geographic and communication barriers. Today, both commercial sites and non-profit sites like FamilySearch.org provide access to literally billions of online records. However, the usage of genealogy sites has not kept pace with the growth of other categories of online activity.

The myth that genealogy is the #1 or #2 hobby on the internet should be dispelled. No data has ever been presented that confirms this often-heard claim. Based on industry traffic data to various types of websites, genealogy is probably a top 50 activity. It is primarily engaged in by a modest percentage of the older population. Young people rarely get involved in online genealogy research. However, with the launch of FamilyVillage by Funium, a Facebook game in the same genre as FarmVille and CityVille, there is now potentially an application that will attract tens of millions of new people of all ages to family history.

We present an overview of traditional genealogy web sites, introduce social networks and social gaming, and discuss the potential scale of a family history-themed social game. Exploiting game usage data from more than 10,000 early testers of FamilyVillage, publicly available data on social games, published demographic data about current visitors to genealogy sites, as well as survey data from millions of Facebook users, we create a model that forecasts potential demographic and geographic adoption of the FamilyVillage game. We also share survey data that may help predict how deeply these game players may get involved in actual genealogy research after having been exposed casually to the hobby through game play.

### **1. The Demographics of Family History**

The first definitive published study of interest in family history was by American Demographics magazine in December 1995 [1]. Based on nationwide surveys conducted by Maritz Marketing, it was discovered that approximately 7% of the adult population in the U.S. was *involved* at least somewhat in family history research. However, a much larger audience, close to half of U.S. adults is *interested* (but not involved) in family history.

Many factors have been discussed by family history industry participants which limit the number of people involved in family history. These include the perception that family history is boring, the high cost of subscribing to commercial services, the amount of time required to make breakthroughs and to pick up where one left off, the complexity of doing genealogy research, the

difficulty of researching certain times and places, language barriers, primitive collaboration tools, and the relatively small percentage of records that are online, or have useful indexes.

## 2. Impact of the Internet on Family History

It is probable that the internet has had a very positive impact on interest in family history. Ancestry's annual revenue now exceeds \$300 million and its annual marketing budget is more than \$50 million, including more than \$10 million for television ads. GenesReunited, the most popular genealogy web site in the UK, has 11 million registered users (nearly 18%) in the UK (population 62 million).

Ten years after the American Demographics survey was published, Ancestry, the leading commercial genealogy firm, issued a press release indicating that according to a recent poll, 73% of Americans are interested in discovering their family history.

But the current internet-enabled family history experience has changed very little in the past 10 years. It relies still on the straightforward online search and online family tree building paradigm. Meanwhile, other online activities have grown far faster in popularity than family history.

Referring to this survey, the former CTO of FamilySearch made the following comment on a blog in April 2006:

I think we're missing the point. In the survey, 73% said they were "interested" in their family history, but only something like 29% of those had ever sat down to draw out a pedigree. I once heard a very wise man say that "genealogy needs to be like a \*game\*." I think about this every day. If we want to get more people doing genealogy, we need to make it more fun, and improving how we create pedigrees isn't enough. Pedigrees are like tax forms. Accountants love tax forms, but how many other people do? Genealogists love pedigrees, but what about everyone else? We need to think about the kinds of things that most people find fun: looking at photos, reading stories, discovering and nurturing personal relationships, being creative and sharing what they know. We need be thinking much further outside the "record manager box."

## 3. Most Popular Online Activities

The Pew Internet & American Life Project tracks the percentage of Internet users who report doing various online activities. The July 22, 2008 survey shows the following:

	Percent of Internet users who report this activity
Send or read email	92
Use a search engine to find information	89
Search for a map or driving directions	86
Look for info on a hobby or interest	83

Research a product or service before buying	81
Check the weather	80
Look for health/medical info	75
Get travel info	73
Get news	73
Buy a product	71
Visit a local, state, or federal government website	66
Buy or make a reservation for travel	64
Surf the Web for fun	62
Go to a website that provides info or support for a specific medical condition or personal situation	58
Research for school or training	57
Watch a video clip or listen to an audio clip	56
Look for "how-to," "do-it-yourself," or repair information	55
Look online for news or information about politics or the upcoming campaigns	55
Look up phone number or address	54
Do any banking online	53
Watch a video on a video-sharing site like YouTube or GoogleVideo	52
Take a virtual tour of a location online	51
Do any type of research for your job	51
Look online for info about a job	47
Get sports scores and info online	45
Get info online about a college, university, or other school you or a family member might attend	45
Download other files such as games, videos, or pictures	42
Get financial info online, such as stock quotes or mortgage interest rates	41
Send instant messages	40
Look for info about a place to live	39
Download computer programs from the Internet	39
Pay bills online	38
Download music files to your computer	37
Upload photos to a website so you can share them with others online	37

Look for information on Wikipedia	36
Send or receive text messages using a cell phone	35
Look for religious/spiritual info	35
Play online games	35
Listen to music online at a website	34
Read someone else's online journal, web log, or blog	33
Rate a product, service, or person using an online rating system	32
Use online classified ads or sites like Craig's list	32
Log on to the internet using a wireless device	30
Listen to a live or recorded radio broadcast online, such as a newscast, sporting event, or radio show	29
Categorize or tag online content like a photo, news story, or blog post	28
Search for info about someone you know or might meet	28
Pay to access or download digital content online	28
Share files from own computer with others	27
Download video files to your computer	27
Participate in an online auction	26
<b>Research your family's history or genealogy online</b>	<b>25</b>
Download screensavers from the Internet	23
Chat in a chat room or in an online discussion	22
Download computer games from the Internet	21
Create content for the Internet	19
Download a podcast so you can listen to it or view it at a later time	19
Make a donation to a charity online	18
View live images online of a remote location or person, using a webcam	17
Use an online social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, or Friendster	16
Sell something online	15
Visit an adult website	13
Take a class online just for personal enjoyment or enrichment	13
Participate in an online discussion, a listserv, or other online group that helps people with personal issues or health problems	12
Send or receive an invitation to a meeting or party using an online invitation service	12

Take a class online for credit toward a degree of some kind	12
Create or work on your own online journal or blog	12
Take material you find online—like songs, text, or images—and remix it into your own artistic creation	11
Buy or sell stocks, bonds, or mutual funds	11
Make a phone call online	8
Go to a dating website or other site where you can meet people online	6
Create an avatar or online representation of yourself	6
Download or share adult content online	4

#### **4. Social Networks and Social Games**

Facebook now has more than 600 million active users worldwide. In the United States, there are 141 million registered users. This accounts for more than 71% of the U.S. online population. One fourth of all internet page views in the U.S. are on Facebook.

Worldwide, hundreds of millions of Facebook users play games. The leading game developer on Facebook is a 4-year old company called Zynga. They have 13 hit games with more than 1 million active users and a total of 297 million monthly users of its Facebook games. CityVille, a game that is just 3 months old, now has 100 million active users.

#### **5. FamilyVillage on Facebook: Genealogy as a Social Game**

The first attempt to launch a popular social game on Facebook that uses genealogy as a major theme is FamilyVillage from Funium, LLC.

We present usage data from the first few thousand testers of FamilyVillage showing how they are using the game. We discuss the game mechanics that are designed to create a fun, social experience, independent of family history, and the game mechanics that are closely connected to family trees and family history document research. We share some preliminary data about how the family tree which contains ancestor names and dates and places and the village library which stores actual family documents that are discovered during game play grow over time.

We also report the results of several surveys that we have run which may help predict how many casual social game players will find themselves doing online genealogy research outside of FamilyVillage for the purpose of furthering their game experience, and how many will begin pursuing family history for its own sake.

#### **References**

[1] “Climbing the Family Tree,” in American Demographics magazine, December 1995.