



There's an App for Exploring the Smithsonian

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Other families moseyed around the National Air and Space Museum on Saturday morning, looking at exhibits and chatting with each other.

But not the Harrisons. They zipped by the crowds because they were on a mission: to answer the most questions and get the most points in the goSmithsonian Trek, the Smithsonian's new trivia challenge sponsored by the official visitor's guide.

"I'll do the poetry, Graham, if you tell me which Apollo mission landed us on the moon," Patricia Harrison said to her husband while their 9-year-old son, Colin, dashed from display to display.

The family was part of a group of more than 60 people who showed up for Saturday's kickoff event for the game.

The goSmithsonian Trek is essentially a scavenger hunt, but it's a little different from ones children may have played in the past. Players visit nine Smithsonian museums, answering 70 questions via an iPhone or Android application, available to download for free. Players can also track the status of others participating in the game.

The questions have different point values and vary from history ("Which Wright brother wrote a letter to the Smithsonian?") to exercising one's creative side ("Write a haiku about your favorite exhibit.").

"You come away with knowledge on this scavenger hunt," said Beth Py-Lieberman, editor of goSmithsonian and the person who conceived the idea for the trek.

Saturday's event gave players only four hours to answer questions as they raced to win an iPad, but the entire challenge lasts through July 24. When it ends, the two players with the most points will each receive an iPad.

Thom Ferlisi triumphed at Saturday's event, after booking through the museums and answering all 70 questions. For Ferlisi, the game introduced him to two museums — the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the National Museum of African Art.

"For locals, it's a nice way to bring them to places they haven't been or show them exhibits they haven't seen," he said.

Saturday's event allowed players to note quirks in the system. For instance, if correct answers weren't worded in a certain way, the game would reject them. Also, the trek app saps battery power, which required some people to charge their phones in the middle of the game.

Py-Lieberman said she always thought a scavenger hunt would be a cool way to tour the museums. She came up with the idea with her children and their friends, all of whom are very tech-savvy.

She discovered SCVNGR, a technology company in Boston, which had developed a location-based game that

allowed people to use their cell phones to play trivia games at different places, from their favorite restaurant to a new theater they're visiting.

Py-Lieberman connected with Kellian Adams, the museum education technologist at SCVNGR, to start creating the go-Smithsonian Trek six months ago. Previously, the company had worked with the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Zoo to create games.

This particular trek was different, since it encompassed nine museums: the Smithsonian Castle, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African Art, the National Air and Space Museum, the Freer Gallery of Art, the Sackler Gallery, the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of Natural History and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

The company and goSmithsonian worked together to develop the trek and decided to make it available for one month. After the game ends, the goSmithsonian staff will evaluate how visitors handled it before deciding on the next step.

If they do continue the game, people without smart phones will be able to participate by texting their answers, Adams said.

Also, goSmithsonian will change the questions on a monthly basis so people can visit regularly and see different exhibits, Py-Lieberman said.

Py-Lieberman followed along with Saturday's activity on an iPad while sitting in the Smithsonian Castle.

She laughed as she read some of the haiku aloud, including this one by trekker John K.: "Colors shown by film/yet it's sound that overwhelms/the screeching of reels."

She likened her excitement of seeing the crowd that morning to throwing a party and being scared that no one would show up: "You never know how these things will go. You just hope for the best."