

# Catch the Book Bug



(From left) Yeoh Peng Hong, 11, Yeoh Peng Yi, eight, and Yeoh Sue Han, seven, with their Book Bugs cards at the National Library. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Ilika Motani, 10, and her brother, Darshan Motani, six, are avid Book Bugs card collectors.

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Lucian Lee, eight, and Lukas Lee, four, with their parents, Ms Chanelle Lim and Mr Larry Lee, taking part in a National Heritage Board's Heritage Explorers Programme.

ST PHOTO: JEREMY KWAN

The National Library Board's Book Bugs programme, which encourages children to read, has been so popular that the library has run out of cards



Venessa Lee

Kids in Singapore have caught a bug. No worries, no one is sick.

Instead, the children have been busy collecting and trading cards featuring cartoon insects, as part of a reading programme by the National Library Board (NLB).

The Book Bugs programme has become such a hit that NLB has run out of Book Bugs cards since early this month.

The reading scheme, which involves borrowing books to gain points that are then used to redeem

the cards, was launched in May.

It is in its second edition and is proving to be more popular and successful than the first, which was introduced in June 2016 to promote reading and which ran for nine months.

Ms Raneetha Rajaratnam, deputy director of content and services, Public Library Services at NLB, says that more cards will be available from tomorrow.

NLB manages the National Library in Victoria Street and 26 public libraries. Most of the

libraries have Book Bug dispensers for the trading cards.

Ms Rajaratnam says there was increased borrowing after Book Bugs was launched.

In the five months between May and October this year, Book Bugs contributed to about five million loans.

The inaugural edition of the programme contributed to 4.1 million loans over nine months.

Ms Rajaratnam attributes Book Bugs' popularity to "the attractive concept of a collectible card game,

which appeals to children".

Borrowers get one "bug point" credited to their library account for each book borrowed.

A Book Bugs card can be redeemed with every four points. Adding a monthly online quiz is another way to gain points.

The aim is to collect all 80 Book Bugs characters that were introduced earlier this year, which are based on iconic characters in fiction such as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

Shiny cards, prized for their rarity and holographic effects, were also

launched this year.

Collectors can trade cards or play card games with one another.

About 5,500 people took part in two play-off events held earlier this month at the National Library Building, where enthusiasts played and traded cards.

Book Bugs contain elements of gamification, such as collecting points, cards or badges, completing prescribed tasks to reach higher levels of proficiency and unlocking rewards.

This is an approach NLB first em-

ployed in 2009, in a separate trading card game targeted at boys.

Dr Alex Mitchell, an assistant professor in the department of communications and new media at the National University of Singapore, says: "Gamification is the use of game-like elements in non-game applications, with the intention to motivate people to take part in activities for which they may not have any intrinsic motivation."

"Gamification is showing up to some degree in many areas of our lives."

Peng Hong's mother, Ms Joanne

He cites examples such as giving a child a gold star for every page of homework completed, or buying him an ice cream if he completes one row of 10 stars.

But gamification has its drawbacks.

Dr Mitchell says: "Gamification is simply layered on top... In most cases, if it is taken away, the motivation disappears."

"This is why taking the time to actually design a game from the ground up, using proper game design principles, so as to incorporate the learning activity as part of the gameplay itself, is in my opinion, much more likely to be successful."

So how effective has Book Bugs been in getting kids to read more?

While the programme cannot ensure that the children read all the books they borrow to get the cards, children and parents who participate tell The Sunday Times that it has encouraged the young ones to read more and even make new friends.

In the past few months, children have been swapping and haggling over cards with fellow Book Bugs fans at libraries.

Ilika Motani, 10, and her brother Darshan, who had a Book Bugs-themed cake for his sixth birthday recently, did not know Yeoh Peng Hong, 11, and his two younger siblings, until they came together for this interview.

Yet, they started trading Book Bugs cards immediately after discovering their common passion.

The children say they might approach other kids clutching similar booklets as theirs, where they keep their cards, or those they bump into at the Book Bugs dispensing machines.

Ilika says the card trading teaches her "basic economics".

"It makes you think about how much you think something is worth, and how to bargain for it."

"For example, if someone wants to give you a card in exchange for a card with a Guardian on it, you have to think about it as Guardians are more powerful than others," she says.

She was already a voracious reader before, but the game has made her even more interested in reading, she says, adding that she has started picking up books she would not have before, such as cook books.

Peng Hong's mother, Ms Joanne

Lee, a 40-year-old teacher, describes Book Bugs as providing a safe environment away from screens and computer games, where the kids learn the soft skills of interacting with other children when they play or trade cards.

Ms Nur Liyanna Hanafi, 22, a third-year arts management student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, has also used gamification to design a learning programme for preschoolers, a collaboration between the National Heritage Board and the school.

She and her teammates chose a quest motif from Dora The Explorer, a children's television show, to find missing objects, as part of a project teaching preschoolers about Malay heritage.

The kids had to help a sultan find a missing songkok, a traditional hat worn by Malay men, and a kerongsang, a three-piece brooch set, in Kampong Glam.

Ms Nur Liyanna says her teammates designed the characters to look like avatars.

"When I was young, when I saw life-size cartoon mascots walking around, I got so excited, I wanted to create the same thing for the children," she says.

Gamification intended for children can also benefit the whole family.

Eight-year-old Lucian Lee gained his Young Curator and National Heritage Board's Heritage Explorers Programme, which is targeted at primary school children, by learning about Singapore's heritage in museums and other places.

He had to write short passages on what he saw in places such as the Peranakan Museum, where he learnt that large containers called kamchongs were used to keep food warm, while cosmetics and sweets could be stored in smaller kamchongs.

He also learnt that his neighbourhood of Punggol was once home to two zoos, in the 1920s and 1960s.

His parents and four-year-old brother Lukas accompany him on these heritage excursions, which helps them bond, says Lucian.

His mother, Ms Chanelle Lim, 39, a manager in the supply-chain industry, adds: "We're learning new stuff as well."

venessal@sph.com.sg