



## GAMES AND THE LIBRARY'S MISSION

*A game is a form of play with goals and structure.*

—Kevin Maroney, *The Games Journal*

There are many definitions of games presented by scholars of ludology, the study of games. As with any serious pursuit of a topic, the best way to start is to present the definition that will be used for the given work. The definition of a game, for the purposes of this book, is “a form of play with goals and structure.”<sup>1</sup> While this is a rather simplistic definition, it captures the breadth of game formats available. This makes it a good fit for gaming in libraries as it matches the breadth of media formats that libraries support.

There are three components to this definition. The first is the concept of *play*, which separates a game from other forms of activities that are game-like but are not play. Professional sports, for example, are not seen by the players as a play activity. Play can have other benefits—games build many different skills and different types of life literacies—but this emphasizes the importance of considering that the gaming activity should be viewed as play. This is where a

number of educational “games” fall short, in that they are really drills in a game form and fail at the aspect of providing play. Without the aspect of play, games also lose their motivational power to inform. A game without play is not a game.

The second component is *structure*. A play activity without structure is simply play. The components of a game can be used for play without the rules to manipulate them. The tabletop game Crossbows and Catapults has bricks that can be used to build castles and devices that fling disks across the table to knock down these bricks. Many children (and adults) do not bother with the rules and play with the components of the game as a toy. While this is play, it is not a game until rules are imposed.

These rules, though, do not have to be the official rules that come with a game. The players can develop their own rules to make play into a game, and many times children will do exactly this after mastering the basic concepts of a plaything. A swing, for example, may be used as a toy to rock back and forth; conversely, by adding a start point and rules about how high each swing must be, players can then compete to swing the most number of times in a time period. A sandbox can be used as a place to play, or a game can be created around building the tallest sand castle.

The final component to this definition is the *goal*. Without a goal, a play activity with structure is still just play. The swing game just described is still just swinging if the goal of “highest number of qualifying swings in a time period” is not set. The goal gives the play a purpose, allows players to improve, and sets limits on the activity. The goal is also a critical part of motivation. Goals can be self-imposed to turn play into a game. Goals can also be long-term or short-term; a role-playing game (RPG), for example, does not typically have an overarching goal, but instead, it has many smaller goals that are imposed both by the players and by the game master who runs the game.

Using this definition helps us to consider what falls into the area of a game activity. Jigsaw puzzles, for example, fall into this definition

of a game and are used by libraries in a very similar way to other tabletop game activities. Sports and gambling may be games, depending upon the view of the activity as play; professionals are doing the activity for work and thus come to it with a very different perspective than those enjoying the activity as a play activity. Simulations may be games, depending upon the intent of those using them.

One common question is: "Is Second Life a game?" According to this definition of a game, Second Life and other virtual worlds are not games, as they have no goals. Participants can establish a goal for themselves or can create goals within the virtual world, just as children make their own games out of play in a sandbox. Someone in Second Life may decide that the goal is to build the tallest building on his or her island or to accumulate a million Linden dollars; that person has now turned Second Life into a game. The tools within Second Life can also be used to create games for other people to play, but for the purposes of this book, Second Life is not a game.

## **"What Do Games Have to Do With Books?"**

I was part of a group interview at the 2008 American Library Association (ALA) midwinter conference with a reporter from the *New York Times*. She was cynical about the idea of games in libraries and, after hearing about various projects, asked, "What do games have to do with books?" Her question reflects what many think about games in libraries. For librarians, this will be a question that they face from their managers, boards, the local media, and the public: What role does gaming have in the library? To answer this question, there are a few different perspectives to consider.

### ***What Do Games Have to Do With Books?***

Libraries are about more than just books. Many libraries fulfill their missions of providing information via a multitude of formats. Public

libraries have carried music for decades, and movies are one of the most popular circulating items. As games are now a popular form of recreational media in the marketplace, they should live alongside other forms of popular recreational media at the library. Therefore, the question “What do games have to do with books?” comes from a lack of understanding of the more holistic nature of what libraries do.

Libraries have circulated games for decades. Many libraries have board games and “games in a book” that can be checked out by patrons. School libraries have also circulated games that are related to the curriculum, and the circulation of video games is of growing interest in public and academic libraries. This process of building and circulating a game collection is based upon library policy and, therefore, it is more straightforward than hosting a gaming program within the library.

Gaming programs have been part of library services for a long time. In the 1850s, libraries hosted Chess clubs. Libraries have hosted bridge and Scrabble clubs, integrated games with summer reading and storytime programs, and provided access to computer games as a way to help people learn and become comfortable with computers. Many of the librarians who we surveyed do not view offering Chess or summer reading games as “gaming in the library,” but the reality is that libraries have a history of supporting games. The emphasis on gaming is changing in U.S. society as gaming grows as a significant form of entertainment in adult education. To respond to this change, the emphasis on gaming in libraries is also growing.

Even though games have value as a library offering on their own merits, there *are* in fact connections between many games and books. Many games are set in context, and if that context has a connection to books, then the games can be a great inspiration to players to learn more about the context via reading. A game about music can inspire further interest in music just as a game set in a historical context can inspire someone to want to learn more about that time

in history. Gaming can provide inspiration for reading and research; libraries have the ability to tap the motivational facet of games to inspire a patron to learn more about a topic area through traditional library services. The implication of this is that the context in which games are placed is important.

### ***What Does Gaming Have to Do With Literacy?***

Another question asked about gaming involves what gaming has to do with literacy. There are several different ways to approach this question based upon different concepts of literacy. The narrowest definition of literacy is based upon reading, and some games do require reading to play. Many board games and RPGs have a considerable number of written rules and text on game components. Some video games also incorporate reading as part of the game through scenes that develop the story, descriptions of items picked up in the game, or text-based menu systems. Eli Neiburger, one of the pioneers in video game tournaments for teens in public libraries, recalled that having to choose the Save option from a menu taught his son the basic building blocks of reading at a very early age.<sup>2</sup>

Defining literacy more broadly makes the connection to games much easier to make. When people read, they are interpreting symbols in context and applying a set of rules to determine meaning from those symbols. Writing is the manipulation of those symbols within a context and a set of rules. These rules can be passed on explicitly or observed and developed implicitly. In a broader sense, developing the ability to take a set of symbols, interpret them, and then manipulate them within a context according to rules is developing literacy skills. In this way, games excel in teaching literacy, as each game requires a player to learn a set of rules and symbols and manipulate those symbols in some way.

Another way to look at literacy is to recognize that there are many forms of literacy needed to live in today's world. James Paul Gee, in

his highly cited work *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, presents 36 different learning principles that games teach players. Some of these include risk-taking, identifying with different roles and cultures, problem solving, and developing tacit knowledge through practice. Those who play a variety of games are more resilient to life changes because they have learned to adapt in many different changing situations.

### ***What Does Gaming Have to Do With Information Literacy?***

Within the library context, a common use of the term *literacy* means “information literacy,” which involves learning about the discovery, selection, and use of appropriate information resources. There are a few research projects developing games that explicitly teach information literacy skills, but, as is typical, these educational “games” sacrifice fun and gameplay for explicit teaching. Too many educational games focus on education over the game and end up not being an enjoyable experience, which can have a negative impact on learning. Some game-show models for information literacy games, though, do take the entertainment aspects of a game show and combine it with the educational aspect of teaching information literacy to create a more motivational gaming and learning experience.

There are several recreational gaming activities that do require information literacy skills. Because of their complexity, typical role-playing games require several books to be able to play, and players must retrieve information throughout the gaming session. Computer-based RPGs also can require this type of activity. Constance Steinkuehler has written a variety of articles about the development of information literacy skills in massive multiplayer online games.<sup>3</sup> To succeed in these types of games, players must do considerable research about the world in which they live. As the companies producing these games provide few information resources, the players of the games create massive databases,

guides, and communities of support as they document every aspect of these virtual worlds.

### ***Isn't Gaming Noisy and Disruptive?***

Today's libraries *are* noisy and disruptive! Many libraries now have a quiet room for people who need to focus, while the rest of the library buzzes with groups working and talking, people playing and chatting, and customers enjoying the attached library café. Interactive games fit right in alongside an interactive library. That said, most libraries offer gaming programs in meeting rooms or other areas that are not in the middle of the library so that patrons who need quiet can avoid the noise and excitement that goes along with gaming.

### ***What About Violence in Video Games?***

Given the graphical nature of some video games, there is concern about the library presenting the violent side of gaming. If libraries are circulating games, then the same policy that dictates the selection of violent movies and violent books should dictate the selection and circulation of violent video games. If the game is being played as a library program, then the library needs to know why that particular game was selected for the program. If there is an underlying goal for the gaming program that can be met only through a violent video game, then the answer to this question comes from that goal. If the goal for the library program can be met through video games without graphic violence, then libraries can make those choices. Just as libraries do not purchase every book that is published, they do not purchase every game that is produced.

### ***What About Gaming Addiction?***

The concept of addiction is not applicable just to games—other forms of media such as books, music, or movies can be just as

addictive. Consider the large posters in the library with the single word *READ*: Libraries have been “pushing addiction” through reading for decades. Any recreational activity can be addicting; just ask someone who stayed up all night to finish a gripping novel or watch a season’s last few episodes of his or her favorite television series. Gaming is no different from these other recreational activities. If a community is concerned about game addiction, the library can run gaming through regularly scheduled short gaming programs instead of having gaming available all of the time.

### ***What Does Gaming Have to Do With the Library?***

This brings us to what the real question should be: What does gaming have to do with the library? It is important that gaming support a library’s mission. As gaming takes resources away from other library activities, gaming services should be developed within the mission and goals of the library, in balance with other services. While games are fun, the justification that the library is spending resources on games because they are fun is not a reason that will please boards of trustees or upset patrons. Instead, gaming needs to support the library’s mission in some way.

From the surveys of libraries done through the Library Game Lab of Syracuse over the last few years, the three most popular goals in bringing gaming programs into the library are: 1) games are used to attract underserved populations, 2) games are an additional service for groups already using the library, and 3) games provide an opportunity for members of a library community to interact socially with each other, improving the library’s role as a community hub. For many library users, their interaction with game media has replaced time spent interacting with book, music, and movie media, so providing access to game media is the next logical step for the library. Gaming provides useful marketing tools in getting the attention of those who feel the library has nothing for them and can draw them into the library. Once they get people in the door, libraries can expose



users to other library services; therefore, gaming as a marketing tool is one way that gaming can fit into the mission of the library.

Many libraries, regardless of type, have a goal of being a community hub. They are nonbiased, safe, noncommercial spaces where members of the community can interact; this type of space can be difficult to find. The internet has done a good job in allowing people to find communities online, but the result is that there are fewer local communities. The library can provide that type of community hub. Through gaming, it can provide an activity that engages people of different ages and backgrounds who may never meet in social settings elsewhere, but who all live in the same physical space.

It is this aspect of gaming in libraries—gaming across age groups—that is an inspiration for this book. Gaming is a multifaceted activity. There are gaming programs that can be targeted for children, teens, adults, or seniors; however, there are also gaming programs that are appropriate for everyone. Carefully designed gaming programs can reach out to many different age groups and allow members of these groups to meet and engage with each other in a way not possible in most social settings. Games can build bonds between members of a community who would never otherwise meet, such as teens and seniors playing Wii Bowling together, and libraries offer the safe space for this to happen.

Throughout this book, games and gaming programs for each of these audiences—children, teens, adults, seniors, and intergenerational groups—are presented. While this broad spectrum best matches the audience of a public library, those in school and academic libraries can still find value in this book, especially if the library is open to mixers between students, parents, and teachers. Many of the games discussed in this book are appropriate for players of all ages.

Everyone plays at the library!

## Endnotes

1. Kevin Maroney, "My Entire Waking Life," [www.thegamesjournal.com/articles/MyEntireWakingLife.shtml](http://www.thegamesjournal.com/articles/MyEntireWakingLife.shtml) (accessed January 13, 2010).
2. Eli Neiburger, "The Payoff, Up Close and Personal," in *Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium*, Jenny Levine (Chair) (July 2007). Symposium conducted by ALA TechSource in Chicago, IL.
3. For example, see Constance Steinkuehler, "Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming as a Constellation of Literacy Practices," *E-Learning* 4, no.3 (2007): 297–318, [dx.doi.org/10.2304/elea.2007.4.3.297](https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2007.4.3.297) (accessed January 13, 2010).