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Gaming and Literacy: Exploring the Connections

by Scott Nicholson

One of the challenges that some libraries face when they bring in gaming is the question: "How does Gaming relate to Literacy?" Assuming that literacy is a core part of the library's mission, there are several ways to address this question.

The first way to address this concern is that libraries are about much more than just literacy. While a library mission may emphasize literacy, many libraries also emphasize meeting recreational needs of their patrons. Just like music and movies also are not connected to literacy, but are accepted forms of library service, games are a form of media that is not necessarily connected to literacy. For many patrons, games have replaced the role that movies (and television) used to play in their lives as a primary entertainment media, so the changing library is supporting the recreational media needs of a changing patronage.

Another approach to take is to redefine what is meant by literacy. Most people are comfortable with the concept that literacy is about reading and writing. The next step beyond that is to consider what literacy actually is – it's about working with a set of symbols, learning how to derive meaning from the symbols, and applying a set of rules to manipulate the symbols. Reading and writing are just one case of symbolic literacy, where the symbols are letters, numbers, spaces, and punctuation. There are many types of literacies in life that are required, but each requires the underlying skill of being able to take a new set of symbols, derive meaning, and manipulate the symbols through explicit and implicit rules.

If a player engages with many different games, he or she is continuing to develop these symbolic literacy skills. With each new game, the player has to learn a new set of symbols, determine the meaning for each, and then manipulate them in the game via a set of rules. As players get better at this, these improved symbolic literacy skills can also be used for various real-life collections of symbols, like those needed for reading and writing. More about this aspect of literacy is explored by James Paul Gee in his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*.

A weak argument to make is that players have to read words in order to play games. It is true that there are some words required to play most games (like Save and Load), but if someone observes a player, they would see that most players skip over non-required reading. For example, while *World of Warcraft* has many quests that come with several paragraphs of flavor text that could be read, most players do not read the text and skip to what is needed to accomplish the task. Therefore, I would recommend libraries avoid this argument unless, to the outside viewer, the player is

truly reading and working with considerable amounts of text when playing the game.

If the library needs to make the connection of gaming with reading and writing literacy, the best tool to do that is tabletop roleplaying games(RPGs). The most well-known tabletop RPG is Dungeons & Dragons, which has been around for over thirty years. In these roleplaying games, the players work together to tell a story. The rulebooks for many of these games are hundreds of pages long, as the books not only present a set of rules, but a world in which the players explore. While the players do have combats in these games, they also have storytelling and roleplaying experiences. These games allow players to explore and create narrative in a way other games do not. Those watching a roleplaying game will see piles of books (which are used frequently) and see the narrative between players emerge. For libraries needing to tie gaming to literacy, tabletop roleplaying games are the easiest way to do so.

In my next column, I will further explore the world of tabletop roleplaying games, going beyond the worlds of traditional fantasy and looking at small-press and independent, Web-published roleplaying game systems.

Dr. Scott Nicholson has a forthcoming book on Games in Libraries called "Everyone Plays at the Library", due in June 2010 by Information Today.