

Preprint of : Nicholson, S. (2010). Scratch the gaming itch. *Digitale Bibliothek* 2(2), 42.

Scratch the Gaming Itch: Bringing Game Creation into the Library

Scott Nicholson, Associate Professor, Syracuse University School of Information Studies

For the last few years, the popularity of recreational gaming programs in libraries has grown. Most libraries start these programs by purchasing games to be played in the library. Players come together and enjoy developing social connections in the library context, where they are introduced to related library services. But there is an underlying question that arises: How does recreational gaming intersect with the educational purpose of libraries?

There are a number of ways to answer that question. On the surface, one can defend the reading required to play many games; however, this defense does not hold up well to scrutiny due to the resources required to support games compared to the learning potential. Another approach is to reconsider literacy as the learning of a ruleset and the manipulation of symbols using that ruleset to create meaning. In games, this is what players do; therefore, players who are adept at many different games can apply their rule-learning skills to other aspects of life.

Another concept, put forth by researchers such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, is that of "gaming literacy." Salen and Zimmerman have written one of the best books on game design, called *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, and they have explored how teaching concepts of game design and game creation are valuable in teaching more traditional subjects. Salen is currently working on a gaming school in New York City called Quest to Learn (<http://www.q2l.org/>), where students in their 6th-12th years of education will focus on a curriculum centered on game creation concepts.

There are several models that libraries can use to bring programs focusing on game design to their users, and this will be an ongoing theme in my columns for 2010. In my remaining space this month, I would like to introduce a free tool created by the media lab at MIT called Scratch. Scratch, available for free at <http://scratch.mit.edu>, is a platform for making interactive programs designed for youth.

Scratch uses a basic form of object-oriented programming that is driven by a point-and-click interface that uses building blocks to create programs. Game creators start with some type of an image (known as a sprite) and associated behaviors, controls, sound, and motion to that sprite. All of these options are on colorful puzzle pieces that snap together to create a series of actions affiliated with a sprite. Additional sprites can then be created, each with their own behaviors and rules for interaction with other sprites. These games can grow in complexity with basic logic constructs and other tools found in programming.

Those who have created Scratch games can share them via the Scratch website. This social network of budding game designers has created a library of thousands of games, each of which has its code available for all to explore, modify, and learn from. Learners can find a game that they like, examine the code to see how something has been done, and then modify their own game.

There is also a portal for educators using Scratch at <http://scratched.media.mit.edu/>, which has lesson plans and other teaching resources valuable for librarians creating a Scratch program. Using these tools, librarians could put together a one-time Scratch demonstration or a summer-long Scratch program which culminates in a Game Fair for creators to show off their works. Along side the game creation program, librarians can bring in speakers from the game industry and other resources about game design.

As can be seen from this basic example, game design programs have both the benefits of recreational play while also fitting into the educational mission of many libraries. Have your patrons build something from Scratch today!