Reframing Gaming

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Over the past few years gaming has grown in popularity to the point where many call it the next new media. Many libraries have responded by supporting gaming activities. The response to games in libraries has not always been positive, as some have questioned the validity of libraries supporting this type of entertainment.   Some wonder if libraries are so desperate to bring in patrons that they are turning to any form of entertainment to bring people in the door. To learn more, we did a study in 2007 at the Library Game Lab of Syracuse University where we called 400 randomly selected public libraries to learn how they supported gaming. The purpose of this article is to refute a few commonly-held misconceptions about gaming and propose a way to reframe gaming in libraries that makes it a natural fit with library services.

Misconception #1: Gaming in libraries is a new activity.

Libraries have been supporting gaming for decades. Public libraries in England in the 1800s supported gaming and other leisure activities as a way of luring people away from the public houses. Libraries in the US have supported chess, Scrabble, and bridge clubs throughout much of the 1900s. Most children's areas in libraries have some types of games or game-like activities available. Current coverage of gaming in libraries usually focuses on video games; however, which leads to the misconception that gaming in libraries is a new activity. Our research showed that of the 40% of public libraries that have formal gaming programs, board games and traditional games like Chess were the most popular types of games used in programs.

Misconception #2: Only a handful of libraries are supporting gaming.

We found that 77% of those libraries contacted supported gaming in some way. The two most common ways that public libraries are supporting gaming is through games in the children's section and allowing patrons to play Web-based games on the public computers.   Gaming is more prevalent in libraries than most people realize.

Misconception #3: Libraries that support gaming are just becoming arcades.

While video games like *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Guitar Hero* are the subject of many photo ops and discussions about gaming, it is important to recognize that there are many types of games. Board games like Chess and Monopoly, card games such as Bridge and Pokemon, casual puzzle games on the Web, educational computer games, roleplaying games, and historical miniatures games all fall into this concept of gaming in libraries. Different gaming activities are appropriate for different age groups, and it is important to match the game to the players. Gaming can also create opportunities for members of

different generations to come together and interact, which improves the library's role as a hub of the community.

Reframing Gaming as Participatory Storytelling

What role does gaming play in library services? In order to reframe the way we think about gaming, I will compare it to another well-established library service: Storytelling. Storytelling is a key service in public and school libraries and few would argue that it does not play a role. A good storyteller will engage the listener by opening the door to another world. Through the eyes of the character of the story, those listening can mentally engage with a different time and place, exploring decisions and roles that they would not encounter in their everyday lives. Those listening to stories in the library may or may not check out books and participate in other library services, but that was not the reason for a storytelling program. Storytelling creates a comfortable and inviting environment for people to enjoy spending time in the library.

Gaming is participatory storytelling. The designer of the game sets up the backstory, the world, the rules, and in playing the game, participants get to play a part of the story. Games allow us to mentally engage with a different time and place and explore decisions and roles that we would not encounter in our everyday lives. Unlike with a fixed story, games allow players to create the story as they go along, creating a much more engaging experience. In addition, many games allow players to interact with each other as characters in this story, and many times these interactions improve the relationship between players outside the game, even crossing traditional social boundaries.

Different games emphasize different parts of this activity. Roleplaying games focus on the richness of the world. Abstract games like chess or bridge focus less on the world and backstory and more on the interaction of the rules and components. Video games like *Dance Dance Revolution* highlight a very small portion of the story and create an intense experience for people to perform in different ways. The world, the rules, and the interaction between a player and the game, as well as the player and other players, all create different experiences. As it allows the players to engage in different activities, gaming can improve different types of mental and physical skills that are difficult to engage in other ways.

Librarians can consider gaming as "Storytime for the rest of us". Having a variety of gaming activities can draw interest from not only the teens who are drawn to video games, but also the adults and seniors who may be interested in other forms of gaming. Games can also bring people together from different walks of life together.

Storytelling is not the focus of the library, but it is an important service. Gaming activities, like storytelling, can capture the imagination and create a comfortable and inviting environment to encourage participants to enjoy spending time in the library.