Chapter 3: A Conceptual Model of the Library Gaming Experience

When running a gaming program, the focus of the library should be on the gaming experience and not on the game itself. For example, there are many different types of board games. The game experience brought about by a strategy board game where people are fairly quiet and thinking is different than the game experience brought about by a party board game where people are focused on the social interaction. When libraries consider a program, it is better to first consider the game experiences they want to facilitate and then select the games rather than select the games and then build the program around the games.

It is important to match the game experiences to the type of players involved. Because of this, an early step in planning a gaming program is to think about the users. The nature of the gaming industry and game marketing can lure planners into the trap of focusing on a specific game that they build the program around. This can create a program that doesn't match the needs of the library and can be hard to justify.

The better approach is to consider what types of users the programs should serve and how they should be served in line with the library mission, and develop program goals out of that mission. After this, the library selects the gaming experiences that the program will facilitate, and, only after this does the library select specific games for the program. The result is a program based upon the users, is justifiable, and has library goals by which the program can be assessed.

Model of the Library Game Experience[A]

A model of the library game experience is useful in understanding the difference between game experience archetypes. This model brings together the participants, spectators, and library staff and resources along with the ways in which they interact.

Players, who are those engaged with each other through an agreed-upon set of rules in pursuit of a specified goal, bring their own background knowledge to the game. Spectators may be those who aren't intending to play, such as parents or friends, or those who are not actively playing in a game. During the course of an event, players will become spectators and vise versa as people try different games and wait to take their turn. Library staff can choose their level of involvement – they can put out the games and step

back, they can be involved in helping players learn games and meet other players, they can chat with spectators, or they can fill in needed positions in a multiplayer game.

For the purposes of this discussion, there are a few concepts that are important. The focus of the gameplay is the representation of the "game state". In a board game, this game state representation is the board and the pieces, while in a video game, this representation is presented through changing pixels on the screen. Players typically have some type of avatar in the game state such as a pawn or character or the Player may be directly engaged in the game state. Players interact with each other indirectly by manipulating the game state through a set of agreed-upon rules until the ending condition is reached and a winner is determined.

Most games are placed within a "game world." The game world is the story in which the gameplay exists. Sometimes the story is not very involved or even needed to play the game, while other times, the story is well-developed and a critical part of the gameplay. Some games are set in a pre-existing world, either through tie-ins with other forms of media or by being set in a specific historical setting. In some types of games, the players are creating the game world as they play the game. Players can interact with each other socially in different ways – in some games, players take on the role of characters and interact as their characters, while in other games, players interact as themselves. All of these components are shown together in figure 1.
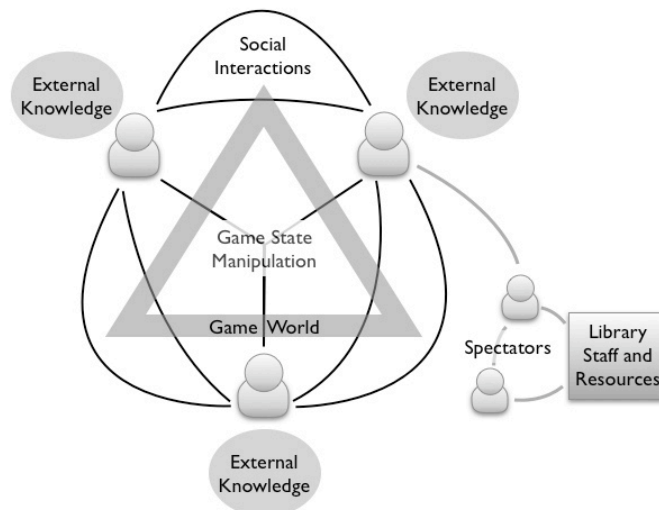

FIGURE 1: Model of the Library Game Experience

The connection lines in the model represent interactions. There are two parts to an interaction between the player and the game state. First, the player must decide what action to take, and then, second, the player must successfully carry out that action. Most card and board games emphasize these strategic decision-making aspects of this interaction. On the other hand, most video games focus on the second part of the interaction; the challenge comes in the player being able to aim and shoot quickly or to press a button at the correct time. Some games, such as many real-time strategy games where a player commands an army in real time, reward both strategic decisions and the skill in manipulating the game state effectively. These different aspects of manipulating a game will be important later in the development of the game experience archetypes.

There are several levels of interaction that can go on between players. Through the changing of the game state, players are interacting with each other. It may not be a deep or meaningful level of interaction, but when one player moves their piece to capture another player's piece, that is interaction between those players. Another form of interaction is direct interaction, such as negotiation or trade, between players under the rules of the game. A third form of interaction between players is social interaction that goes beyond the rules of the game. Players can talk about things not related to the current game state, such as previous turns of the game, other games, or non-gaming topics; these interactions, however, are still part of the game experience.

Spectators may interact with each other about the game or may interact with each other about non-game topics. Depending upon the game and the setting, it may or may not be appropriate for spectators to interact with the players. After an exciting game, it is common to see players become spectators and talk with others about game concepts, strategy, or skills.

Library staff members and volunteers interact with all attendees by welcoming them to the event, explaining the games, and ensuring that players playing safely and fairly. Library Staff should be actively engaged with spectators, helping them to find open games to join, encouraging them to join the fun, and taking the opportunity to talk about other related library services.

The final interaction of note is the interaction between the Spectators to other library materials. During a gaming program, libraries should display related library materials in areas where spectators will wait for a chance to play. Libraries should consider resources and game-related displays that provoke questions and discussion. These items, if chosen cleverly, can be aid attendees at the program who did not previously know each other to interact with each other while waiting to play games.

Game Experience Archetypes[A]

There are five elements of the game experiences model that are important for the development of the game experience archetypes:

- The knowledge that the players bring to the game (Knowledge)

- The social interactions between players due to the game (Social)

- The engagement between players and the narrative of the game (Narrative)

- The decisions required by the player in changing the game state (Strategy)

- The actions required by the player in changing the game state (Action)

These five concepts – Social, Narrative, Actions, Knowledge, and Strategy (SNAKS) - are the underlying concepts for the game experience archetypes and are used as the organizational structure for the next five chapters of this book.

Social [B]

A Social game experience focuses on the social interactions between players. Many party games are focused upon these social experiences; in fact, the concept of a "party" game is that the social component is important. Many other types of games bring about social experiences that are external to the game; *Rock Band*, for example, is known for bringing about a social game experience. The social game experience is most appropriate for a library focusing on creating a community hub through game programs.

Narrative [B]

A Narrative game experience focuses on activities that interact with the underlying story behind the game. Roleplaying games, both face-to-face and online, focus on this concept of narrative as players are within an established world and are helping to tell the story of their character within the world. Some games have a narrative available, but that narrative is optional in the successful playing of the game. A library seeking to offer a Narrative game experience should focus on those games that have gameplay elements that require players to engage with the story of the game.

Action [B]

An Action game experience focuses on the player's ability to make changes in the game state. Most video games facilitate Action game experiences; once a player decides what to accomplish in the game, a challenge comes in actually executing that decision in a timely fashion. Tabletop games that use a dexterity element such as *Jenga* create an Action game experience. These experiences can be frustrating to participants without experience when they play against those with experience in a game.

Knowledge [B]

A Knowledge game experience focuses on aspects of the world that are usually external to the game itself. Most educational games fall into this category, as do some party games. Some of these games are designed to help players gain and then

demonstrate knowledge while other games allow players to demonstrate previously acquired knowledge. Libraries concerned about the acceptance of gaming programs can start with knowledge game experiences, as these experiences tend to easily fit within the educational mission of most libraries.

Strategy [B]

A Strategy game experience focuses on the intellectual aspects of the decision-making required to play the game. These decisions include both the short-term tactical decisions required to take advantage of the current game stage and the long-term strategic planning needed to guide a player's actions over the course of a game. Strategy game experiences tend to be longer and more serious games that create a subdued environment, which might be what a library with limited space needs to focus on.

Over the next five chapters, these Gaming Experience archetypes will be more fully explored. Different Gaming Experiences are appropriate for different library goals and patron demographics. Most specific game titles can facilitate different Game experiences; for example, the aforementioned *Rock Band* can be used for both Social and Action game experiences. Libraries will need to decide if they want a gaming program that is focused on one type of Gaming Experience to focus on a single group and purpose or has a variety of Gaming Experiences to provide a broader gaming program.