Going for Games

What Libraries, and Kids, Can Learn about Gaming

ALSC Children and Technology Committee

The second annual Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium was held November 2–4, 2008, in the Chicago area. ALA TechSource sponsored the program in collaboration with ALSC and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS), and the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA). This article briefly highlights a few of the presentations. A complete list of sessions and presenters is available at the ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium wiki, http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Main_Page.

Play Is a Magic Circle

> None of the things they are to learn, should ever be made a burthen to them, or impos'd on them as a task. Whatever is so propos'd, presently becomes irksome; the mind takes an aversion to it, though before it were a thing of delight or indifferency. Let a child but be order'd to whip his top at a certain time every day, whether he has or has not a mind to it; let this be but requir'd of him as a duty, wherein he must spend so many hours morning and afternoon, and see whether he will not soon be weary of any play at this rate.[1]

In the closing keynote of the second annual ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, Jon-Paul Dyson quoted seventeenth-century British philosopher John Locke's belief that required play is no longer play.

*The **ALSC Children and Technology Committee** includes chair Christopher Borawski, Lauren Anduri, Natalie Arthur, Amber Creger, Bradley Debrick, Madeline Walton-Hadlock, Kimberly Hurson, Allison Kaplan, Patty Saidenberg, and Teresa Walls.*

Dyson is vice president for exhibit research and development and associate curator of electronic games at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. He discussed the power of play today and defined play as "fun, voluntary, its own reward, and taking place in a magic circle." A "magic circle" separates the play world from the real world. Dyson listed the benefits of play as refreshing us, relaxing us, increasing our flexibility to life's challenges, promoting learning, sharpening us mentally and physically, as well as making us happier.

Games Produce Learning Engagement

While few would argue that play is important for young children, there often is a perceived disconnect between learning and the majority's view of game play in our lives. Marc Prensky, author of *Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning*[2], stressed during the symposium's opening keynote, "People play games not because they are games but because they're the most engaging intellectual thing we have." With digital games, many adults have a knee-jerk reaction, determining that a game is a waste of time, money, and brain cells without ever engaging with the game or seeking to have an open dialogue about gaming.

Prensky remarked, "If there's a concern about a book, we read it and talk about it. Movie? See it and talk about it. A game?" He implored librarians to gauge their own reactions, to remain open-minded, to discuss game play. Prensky encouraged librarians who are not game players to have gamers write synopses and reviews of games, to ask questions such as "Why do you like it?" and "Is there reason for concern about the content?"

Prensky recommended *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* by John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade[3], stating "Lots of people in their 20s and 30s attribute success

directly to game play." He shared that Stephen Gillett, CIO of Starbucks and former senior director of engineering operations with Yahoo! Inc., attributes his success directly to his managing a three-hundred-person guild in an online world.

Prensky noted that "complex games produce learning engagement." He defined complex games as being not trivial and lasting between eight to one hundred hours. He stressed that multiplayer role playing games, such as World of Warcraft, allow players to cooperate, collaborate, and work in teams, and that such game play promotes effective decision-making under stress. He emphasized that these complex games offer players the opportunity to make ethical and moral decisions, to apply new skills and information, to persist and solve problems, to think laterally and strategically, and to adapt to foreign environments. Games can be a bridge to solving real-life problems.

Three Presenters Look at the Younger Gamer

Amanda Lenhart is the lead author of the PEW/Internet Study of Teens, Video Games, and Civics. A link to the PDF file of this study is available at the Pew Research Center website, www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/263/report_display.asp. One aspect of the study showed that 54 percent of twelve to fourteen year-old respondents play digital games daily, and this group is most likely to use portable game devices. Lenhart noted that massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) involve a quest and a goal, while virtual worlds are typically areas of free play. Two virtual worlds, Whyville (www.whyville.net) and Disney's Club Penguin (www.clubpenguin.com), were mentioned by 13 percent of the twelve to fourteen year-olds interviewed for the study.

In his Pokemon Primer session, Eli Neiburger of the Ann Arbor (Mich.) District Library made the case for Pokemon, stating, "It is a complex system of knowledge to learn for fun." He added that achieving level 100 represents "hours of toil." He remarked that Pokemon is a positive moral example of being kind to the environment and to others as one improves oneself, one's Pokemon, and the world. Each player has to organize and tag Pokemon to be adequately prepared when challenged to a game.

Keynote speaker Andrew S. Bub is a gamer and parent who reviews for the parent audience under the name "GamerDad." The reviews are appropriate for librarians as well and are archived at the What They Play website (www.whattheyplay.com). Bub said that in most games "rash actions usually fail, so games can help some kids slow down and think." He shared that a love of a game can also be a child's motivator for reading. Growing tired of reading the text of one of his daughter's games, he explained, "I told her, 'I'm not going to read that to you anymore. If you want to play that game, you need to learn to read.'"

Standards for Learning and Gaming

Learning to read is among the most complex endeavors any of us has undertaken. It is the path we were expected and demanded to travel. Some children learn to read by what seems like osmosis. In other words, they are keen observers of their environments and by the age of two, three, or four have become fluent readers.

Others come from print-rich environments and understand that the squiggles and lines go together somehow, making meaning. Still, there are many children who need the building blocks of the process of learning to read set before them. That is where games really come into play. And play they are. As we all know, children's play is children's work. These beginning games include memory games, matching games, sequencing card games, bingo games, board games, phonetic awareness games, which can be in a visual or in an electronic format, and more.

In Patty Saidenberg's presentation, "Hey! Wii Want to Do That Too: Gaming and the Elementary Learner," she matched learning standards with games for the Nintendo Wii system. Games based in literacy align with the International Reading Association's (IRA) literacy standards, with state standards, and with the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (ALA, 2007). The IRA's literacy standards can be accessed at the Read-Write-Think website (www.readwritethink.org/standards).

Some of the newest games are being developed for and played on the Wii system, which can support up to four players and offers the opportunity to move in all three dimensions. The Wii offers positive gaming experiences for various types of learners. (Note: Other platforms are Sony Playstation, Microsoft Xbox, other Nintendo platforms, PCs, and more.) Younger children can play early literacy games where pattern, shape, and sequencing are key elements. The children learn in a group while laughing together to a game that highlights core preliteracy skills.

As an example of a game for older learners, Saidenberg shared Nintendo's *Endless Ocean*, a tool/game that aligns with AASL's *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* in all four areas. An alignment with such standards demonstrates to parents the reasons to incorporate game playing in school curricula. Addressing state standards will go far in convincing local stakeholders.

Matching learning objectives of games to state learning standards makes the foundation for gaming in libraries even stronger. For example, *Endless Ocean* meets the New York State (NYS) learning standards in the divisions of math, science, and technology, and social studies. The New York State Standard 4 in science states, "Students will understand and apply scientific concepts, principles, and theories pertaining to the physical setting and living environment and recognize the historical development of ideas in science."[4] *Endless Ocean* also meets NYS Social Studies Standard 3, geography: "Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live—local, national, and global—including the distribution of people, places, and

environment over the Earth's surface."[5] The New York State Learning Standards are available at the New York State Education Department's website (www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/cores.htm).

Libraries: Get in the Game

In a time when information reaches us quickly and is offered to us in an assortment of electronic formats, those who are defined as Gen X, Gen Y, and soon to be Gen Z, view information in the same regard whether it is on paper or in an electronic/virtual format. To them, text is text. This fusion of literacy technologies is just one building block in the foundation of a thriving twenty-first-century learner.

In a world where technology is advancing at record-breaking speeds, we must learn from others in a social environment. The perfect social environment is the library. Games are entryways that introduce us to new technologies, incorporate various learning styles, and simultaneously increase intellectual curiosity and growth. "Games are the most engaging intellectual thing we have," Prensky pithily remarked in the symposium's keynote.

Games are fun to play, and we learn in the process. Card games, board games, string games, electronic games, virtual games—there are a variety of formats and game durations, and there is a game for anyone and everyone. To reap the rewards of games, games must be played, and the earlier the better. A child's brain development is assisted by play including games. First introduced in 1956 and well known among educators, Bloom's taxonomy effectively states the six stages of intellectual development and advancement as knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.[6] Games often require one to use many areas of the cognitive domain.

Our society wants and demands greater thinkers, and the twenty-first-century learner must have a set of skills that gives the opportunity for success at every turn. How do we get there from here? The most basic and simple answering: games. Games are central to learning, and we can easily put them in our libraries. Our libraries are the most social and intellectual edifices in our society. As we all know, library use goes up during tough economic times. This is our opportunity, our call to arms to develop a national gaming program for libraries.

We must get games into libraries and invite our patrons to play them. The Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium demonstrated the importance of that in each of its sessions. Take the opportunity to bring games into your library, play them and judge for yourself the success. &

References

1. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Vol. XXXVII, Part 1. The Harvard Classics. (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14): 119; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/37/1/. (accesed Dec. 27, 2008).
2. *Marc Prensky, 'Don't Bother Me Mom, I'm Learning!': How Computer and Video Games are Preparing Your Kids for Twenty-first Century Success and How You Can Help!* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2006).
3. John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).
4. *Elementary Science: Core Curriculum, Grades K–4* (Albany, N.Y.: The University of the State of New York and The State Education Department, undated): 12.
5. *Learning Standards for Social Studies*, revised ed. (Albany, N.Y.: The University of the State of New York and The State Education Department, 1996): 1.
6. Benjamin Bloom, ed. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, vol. 1 (New York: D. McKay, 1956.)