

# Looking to the Future

*It seems obvious that games will not be leaving our library in the near future.*

—Vinny D'Ambrosio, Pocahontas Middle School (VA) newspaper<sup>1</sup>

If 2007 was a giant leap forward for gaming in libraries, 2008 is poised to be the “year of the game” in our profession. With a round of new publications expected throughout the year, an international conference on the subject (“U Game U Learn”), and a bevy of initiatives from the American Library Association, gaming in all forms will take center stage.

*U Game U Learn*  
<http://ugame-ulearn.com>

During the spring of 2007, Scott Nicholson and a team of students from Syracuse University’s Information Institute conducted a survey of 400 randomly selected institutions in order to “take the pulse of public libraries in the U.S. and understand the role gaming is playing in library services.” The team solicited responses about a broad array of services, asking libraries to consider the subject more broadly than had been measured in the past, including games of all types and formats.<sup>2</sup>

At the 2007 ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, Nicholson released the results of the team’s survey, the first of its kind. Supporting the theory that gaming is not a new service for public libraries, 77 percent of the libraries surveyed self-identified as supporting gaming in one way or another. This encouraging statistic illustrates how many libraries already offer tabletop games (notably chess sets), as well as public Internet computers on which patrons can play Web-based games.

In addition, the Syracuse team found that approximately four out of ten public libraries offer some type of formal, in-house gaming program. Of the 172 institutions that run such programs, about half of them use board games, while only 13 percent use videogame consoles.

Clearly there is room for growth in the area of videogame play, even as board games already enjoy an accepted and even respected role in library services.

While there are many other interesting findings in Nicholson’s survey’s results, gaming in libraries is an evolving proposition. It is not new or revolutionary or even at odds with existing services. Instead, it is an extension of recreational and educational programming libraries have offered for decades, if not centuries. Therefore, it is no surprise that more and more libraries are considering offering expanded or revamped services that include videogames, whether it is for traditional information literacy instruction or to meet the same recreational desires that romance, science fiction, or western novels fulfill.

## New Initiatives

For those librarians who want to further explore or investigate the possibilities for gaming in their institutions (regardless of type of library), a series of initiatives throughout 2008 will help them learn more, connect with others, research best practices, and implement services at an unprecedented level.

The American Library Association is helping to recognize the benefits of gaming in all formats by organizing a national “gaming @ your library” event on the Friday of National Library Week (April 18, 2008). Libraries of all types across the United States will have the chance on this day to offer whichever gaming services are best suited to their institutions to help educate the public about the positive aspects of gaming, as well as to provide a safe community space where patrons of all ages can come together to play together in ways not available elsewhere in their communities.

*More information about gaming  
@ your library*  
<http://lovelibraries.org/gaming>

*Games and Gaming Member  
Initiative Group*  
<http://gaming.ala.org>

At the 2007 ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, Eli Neiburger announced that the Ann Arbor District Library planned to open its online tournament software to *any library* that wants to participate *at no cost*. This means that patrons at any participating library can compete against players at every other participating library, with the results displayed on a national leaderboard on the Web.

The tournament software, dubbed the “GT System,” made available by Ann Arbor DL’s generosity, gives libraries the chance to take gaming to the next level, upping the recreational stakes and providing patrons with a social experience they simply can’t get anywhere else. The GTS will officially launch ongoing tournament standings during the summer of 2008. To learn more or to register your library to participate, visit the GT System Wiki.

*GT System Wiki*  
<http://gtsystem.org>

As in 2007, ALA TechSource will again hold a Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium (GLLS). Audio recordings of the sessions from the 2007 event are available online, as well as video of some of the keynotes and slides and handouts from most of the sessions. Content from the 2008 symposium will also be archived in the same location. Registration will again be limited to 325 participants and is scheduled to open in April. To view the program, register, or access content from the 2007 event, visit the TechSource Gaming Symposium Web site.

*TechSource Gaming Symposium*  
<http://gaming.techsource.ala.org>

Inspired to coalesce the community of ALA members coming together around gaming, Scott Nicholson started a petition to form a Games and Gaming Member Initiative Group within the Association. This group was approved by ALA’s Committee on Organization (COO) at the 2008 Midwinter Meeting, and it continues to grow. Information about the group and how to participate can be found at <http://gaming.ala.org>. It will meet formally, in person, for the first time at the ALA Annual Conference in June.

Some of these events address recreational gaming, while others are designed to help librarians interested in gaming connect with one another. In order to help educate librarians about the connections between gaming and literacy, ALA’s Office for Outreach & Literacy Services (OLOS) received a grant from the Verizon Foundation to provide online content and training for librarians during 2008–2009. Working with relevant groups within ALA, Literacy Officer Dale Lipschultz will coordinate an expert panel of librarians that will examine and document the relationship between videogaming, children’s literacy development, and their use of the library. The project will also produce a “Gaming Literacy Readiness Inventory” (GLRI) for use in public libraries.

Despite all of the new programs and services we are seeing innovative librarians try, our profession is just beginning to explore the wealth of possibilities that gaming offers libraries. I subtitled my first *LTR* “Intersection of Services,” but in hindsight perhaps the term *intersection* should also have been plural. While we don’t want to making gaming the round peg we are trying to fit in every square hole, it’s clear that gaming is not a fad and that there are literacies and knowledge ecologies surrounding it, just as there are for other library services such as book discussions, craft programs, Internet usage, and adult programming.

It may be difficult, given the biases some librarians and patrons still hold in favor of the printed word and the traditional, singular view of libraries as sanctuaries only for books, but it’s important to recognize that we should not judge the content habits of our patrons, whether those habits revolve around books, Web sites, movies, music, or games, lest we offer services based on outmoded reasoning. Soon we will be approaching the time when most living generations will have grown up with videogames, and the stereotype that the great Margaret Edwards held of gaming will not serve us well as a starting point for evaluation of services. It took a long time for the majority of librarians to understand and embrace the Internet, possibly to our own detriment. For too long, we debated whether uses of such resources as e-mail, instant messaging, and social networks were valid patron services in the library. We should not make the same mistake with gaming, in any form.

I have seen firsthand the power of games for literacy, socialization, learning, and mentoring time and time again. In the same way that e-mail, cell phones, instant

messaging, and now text messaging snuck up on us and became ubiquitous, so has videogaming. It is everywhere if we just look around—on buses, trains, airplanes, cell phones, and just about anywhere else you go. Shouldn't we make use of any format that uses knowledge and strategic use of information as its foundation and becomes pervasive? Shouldn't we, of all professions, understand how best to harness it to teach information literacies and provide the communal, social center our patrons seem to crave? Perhaps the question is really how we can not.

## Notes

1. Vinny D'Ambrosio, "New Library Games," *Hawk Talk* [Pocahontas Middle School, Richmond, VA] 7, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 1.
2. Scott Nicholson, "Who Else Is Playing? The Current State of Gaming in Libraries," (presentation, ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, Chicago, IL, July 22-24, 2007); available online in PDF, audio, and video formats at [http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Who\\_Else\\_Is\\_Playing%3F\\_The\\_Current\\_State\\_of\\_Gaming\\_in\\_Libraries](http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Who_Else_Is_Playing%3F_The_Current_State_of_Gaming_in_Libraries).