

# Broadening Our Definition of Gaming

## *Big Games*

*Hot Books is a game that aims to bring life to libraries by making library patrons engage with and create relationships to books they might never imagined existed. . . . By locating the game in a brick and mortar library, the game utilizes the organic, physical site of the library, thereby making the opportunity to play the game special, and yet, ironically, artificially makes the library into a special arena.*

—Nick Reid<sup>1</sup>

One model that redefines gaming is the “big game,” which can be considered the exact opposite of a videogame. Or maybe it’s really just making the world into a giant, real-life videogame. Either way, big games may be an even better fit for libraries than videogames because we already have many of the resources necessary to run them.

Big games are becoming big enough (no pun intended) that there are now several companies whose primary business it is to create them for interested organizations and events. One such company, area/code, defines big games as “large-scale, real-world games” that “might involve transforming an entire city into the world’s largest board game, or hundreds of players scouring the streets looking for invisible treasure, or a TV show reaching out to interact with real-time audiences nationwide.”<sup>2</sup> The company even publishes on its Web site a manifesto that further defines these types of games.

Big Games are large-scale, multiplayer games that include some form of real-world interaction.

Big Games point towards a future in which socially aware networks, smart objects, location sensing and mobile computing open up new ways for people to play.

Big Games use technology, but are not subservient to it. Big Games are made out of people, connections, ideas, situations, and events. Big Games have computers inside of them, not the other way around.

Big Games create a conscious confusion between the real and the imaginary, between ideas and objects, between information and

space. Instead of the simulated worlds of computer games, Big Games transform the physical space around us into a shared gameworld, brought to life by the choices, actions, and experiences of the players.

Big Games encourage a playful use of public space. They have their roots in the neighborhood games of childhood; in the campus-wide games and stunts of college; in the nerd-culture of live-action role playing and Civil War reenactments; in the art-culture of Happenings and Situationism; in urban skateparks, paintball fields and anywhere people gather together to play in large numbers and large spaces.

Big Games are games, not academic exercises, not tech demos. They must be easy to understand but deep enough to encourage thoughtful play. They must have challenges and rewards. They must run the gamut from purely abstract formal systems to richly rendered narrative experiences. They must connect people to people whether they are strangers, rivals or old friends.

Big Games are human-powered software for cities, life-size collaborative hallucinations, and serious fun.<sup>3</sup>

area/code  
<http://playareacode.com>

Depending on the format and genre, you may also see them referred to as pervasive games, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), Live Action Role Playing games (LARPs), or location-based games. The most famous example of a big game is probably *I Love Bees*, which was an alternate reality game for the videogame *Halo 2* on the Xbox console. Commissioned by Microsoft and Bungie Studios and created by a company called 42 Entertainment, this stealth marketing campaign was meant to engage gamers already familiar with the first *Halo* game outside of the small screen. In one culminating moment of the game, players had to coordinate with each other to find thousands of ringing payphones across the country in order to answer a set of questions, which unlocked the next set of clues.

In an October 18, 2004, article about the game in *Wired*, Steve Peters, who runs the Web site ARGN (Alternate Reality Gaming Network), was quoted as saying, "It's a new way of storytelling. We've had novels and movies, and these things kind of blur the lines of fiction and in some ways invade the real world."<sup>4</sup>

In July 2007, Greg Trefry, a big-games designer from a company called GameLab, spoke at the ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, the first national conference to focus solely on gaming and libraries. On his own, Trefry also organizes the annual Come Out & Play festival of big games that takes place in different locations across the world. In his talk, Trefry noted how ideal libraries are as spaces for these types of games because of the real-world resources they can provide. For example, he noted that libraries have

- multiple physical locations (branches)
- unique identifiers (secret codes like Dewey Decimal numbers)
- tools (photocopiers, computers, WiFi)
- places to display clues or game status (on walls)
- what Trefry called "referees," otherwise known as librarians<sup>5</sup>

*ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning,  
and Libraries Symposium*  
<http://gaming.techsource.ala.org>

Trefry's presentation inspired many in the audience to consider this alternative form of gaming, including Eli Neiburger at the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL). By mid-2007, AADL was already the acknowledged leader in hosting gaming tournaments in libraries, offering such a sophisticated experience that kids who attended thought

the setup was done by Nintendo itself. Having already conquered videogames as a service, Neiburger proposed and planned a big game for the AADL's staff in-service day.

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### Case Study 3: Dewey Dare By Eli Neiburger

AADL has a staff in-service day once a year when we close the library for staff training and team building. The day usually includes a keynote speaker on a subject of general relevance to all staff, tours of other downtown Ann Arbor points of interest, some afternoon activities or discussion, staff recognition, and something fun to wrap up the day. In past years, as our gaming programs for the public were getting started, we've had videogaming fill that fun slot, with an all-staff *Mario Kart* tournament one year, and a *DDR/Karaoke* revolution tournament the next year. Players' scores were multiplied by the number of years they'd been with the organization.

After attending the 2007 Games, Learning, and Libraries Symposium and hearing Greg Trefry's amazing talk "Big Games, Big Learning," I thought it would be cool, fun, and different to try a big game for a staff-day activity and explore some of the great ideas that Greg (who would ultimately be our staff-day keynoter as well) covered in his talk. The staff-day committee started with some ideas for a scavenger hunt-type activity that would involve searching for interesting tidbits of information about downtown businesses. As we talked more about the idea, we realized that we wanted to try something new, involve a little of the technology that staff used every day, and find a way to make something fun and competitive that wouldn't take too long.

I was really intrigued by Greg's mention of *You Are Not Here*, a big game that overlaid Baghdad onto New York City and made waypoints of interesting overlaps of these two coordinate spaces. It got me thinking about the coordinate spaces of libraries, especially call numbers. I also was fascinated by the idea of Jane McGonigal's *Reverse Scavenger Hunt* at Foo Camp, which required players to use their creativity to match seemingly disparate things. Those two ideas combined in an idea to essentially overlay the Dewey ranges with the streets of downtown Ann Arbor and require players to creatively match items in the collection to downtown businesses by their respective addresses. Matches would be submitted in blog form to make it easy for all staff to see everyone's results and to have a chance to do a team-based activity around the tools we use every day. We also wanted to get teams out of the building and moving around the town, so we decided that they should take pictures of the businesses they were linking to. I also loved the paranoid element of directly competitive play, so we added a way for teams to

steal matches from other teams by snapping a picture of their opponents on the street.

AADL Staff Day Web site  
www.aadl.org/staffday

So this all came together to form a game we called *Dewey Dare*. Players were grouped into teams of 10–12 players and given 90 minutes to make up to 10 blog posts, each consisting of an image of a business with its address visible, a link to an item in our catalog with the same call number as the business address, and a short justification for the match. Points would be awarded by the judges based on the quality of the match. We made sure that there was at least one camera phone and at least one experienced blogger on each team, and we slapped together an easy way to post the pictures to our Web gallery via e-mail for fast posting.

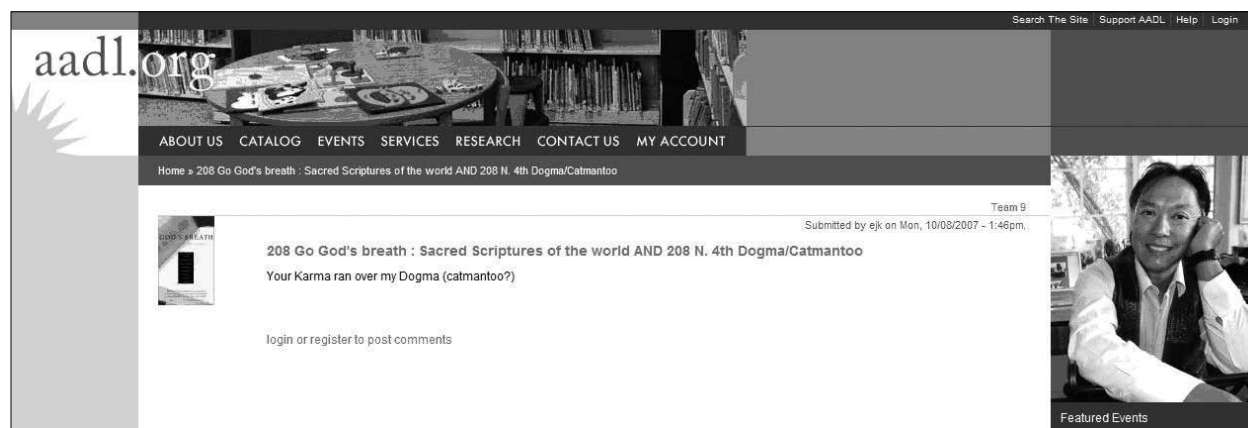
We play-tested the matching component of the game as a committee to make sure that matches were possible, not too time-consuming to find, and easy to judge. My best match was 332.04: Retirement on a Shoestring and 332 S. Ashley: Red Shoes Boutique. Another good one was a travel agency and “How to Move to Canada.” We did add a rule that allowed players to match on 1,000 minus the address to take in account the fact that there are few addresses in downtown over 500 and to double the options for matching a given business.

On staff day, we explained the game, went through a presentation and handout (see Appendix C for the handout), and told the teams where to meet in the library. There was a lot of excitement about the activity and a little trepidation, but everyone had a good attitude.

Unfortunately, we weren’t able to play-test the picture-uploading script in advance, and it choked on the influx of pictures as the teams fanned out and started shooting furiously. After a very fast 90 minutes, the staff came back together for the end of day wrap-up while the committee quickly judged their entries. There were some great matches, including some great use of a rule that allowed players to match businesses with a ½ in their address to any item of fiction, but ultimately, the team that took sniping the most seriously, dispatching a hunting team to track down others, won by stealing all of the best matches of their opponents.

The evaluations for the day showed that a lot of people really loved the game and found it a unique and fun team-building activity. Several people commented that it really encouraged them to work together, use the available tools, and think in new ways, which was great success. However, some staff members struggled with the time limitations, or the glitches in the image processing, or the stress of wanting to win, or being a bottleneck in a team’s process, leading to some tense moments. Others thought that the game was a waste of time or had no application to their jobs. No activity pleases everyone, not even lunch (which was pizza). Overall, it was a great part of a fun day, and we’ve been talking about ideas for big games that we can try with our patrons next. Big games can be big fun, but they don’t have to be big projects!

As AADL’s game illustrates, one of the best things about big games is that anyone can participate and with very little preparation. Although most ARGs use some form of technology within the game (generally for communication or verification), merely playing and working with a team generally requires no technical knowledge



**Figure 2**  
Entry in the AADL’s *Dewey Dare* game played at the library’s 2007 staff in-service day.

or financial purchase on the part of an individual. In fact, general knowledge and the ability to think strategically are often more valuable than technical or specialized knowledge, a feature that allows almost anyone to join in.

I had a similar experience to Eli Neiburger's when listening to Greg Trefry's talk at the 2007 symposium, and his suggestions resonated with me, as well. Afterwards, I immediately began discussing a big game with my coworkers at the American Library Association. Months before, I had proposed running an instance of a game called *Cruel 2 B Kind* during our 2007 Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. This "experimental game" by game designers Jane McGonigal and Ian Bogost turns traditional gameplay on its head by making players into "benevolent assassins."

At the beginning of the game, you are assigned three secret weapons. To onlookers, they will seem like random acts of kindness. But to other players, the seemingly benevolent gestures are deadly maneuvers that will bring them to their knees.

Some players will be slain by a serenade. Others will be killed by a compliment. You and your partner might be taken down by an innocent group cheer.

You will be given no information about your targets. No names, no photos, nothing but the guarantee that they will remain within the outdoor game boundaries during the designated playing time. Anyone you encounter could be your target. The only way to find out is to attack them with your secret weapon.

Watch out: The hunter is also the hunted. Other players have been assigned the same secret weapons, and they're coming to get you. Anything out of the ordinary you do to assassinate YOUR targets may reveal your own secret identity to the other players who want you dead.

As targets are successfully assassinated, the dead players join forces with their killers to continue stalking the surviving players. The teams grow bigger and bigger until two final mobs of benevolent assassins descend upon each other for a spectacular, climactic kill.

Will innocents be caught in the cross-fire? Oh, yes. But when your secret weapon is a random act of kindness, it's only cruel to be kind to other players. . . .<sup>6</sup>

*Cruel 2 B Kind*  
<http://cruelgame.com>

*Hot Books*  
[www.htbks.com](http://www.htbks.com)

Created in 2006, *Cruel 2 B Kind* was first introduced at the "Come Out and Play" festival in New York City. This annual big-games event is held in different cities around the world, and each year new games are introduced. Also played for the first time at the 2006 event was a game called *Hot Books*. Designed by Nick Reid during a University of California-Berkeley game-design class and played in the New York Public Library's Humanities and Social Sciences Branch, the game "aims to bring life to libraries by making library patrons engage with and create relationships to books they might never imagined [*sic*] existed."<sup>7</sup>

Hot Books is a game about attaching books to players. Once a book has been attached to a player, the game requires player to find the book and search it to find the key word that will allow the player to detach the book. Relationships with books are created as players find books they like, and an identity for the book emerges as players exchange the books. Hot Books is a game that is based in the internet, yet also augments the reality of a brick and mortar library.<sup>8</sup>

Using these two games as the basis for a discussion of what ALA could do with the big-game concept, we began exploring possibilities. After talking with Greg Trefry, we decided to run a formal, custom-created big game at the 2008 ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California. The 2008 game most closely resembles an information quest, rather than a "capture the flag" or "tag" model. Conference attendees can sign up for a team on the conference wiki. Teams then scour the convention center, meeting rooms, and exhibit floor for clues to help them solve puzzles to gather the necessary information to finish the quest. The first team to submit the correct answer wins a prize.

It's a very basic game, but one that is designed to engage people within the conference structure, utilizing elements already familiar to every attendee. The intent is to create new models of socialization and networking opportunities within the conference. Players can join any team and meet new colleagues, using the game as an introduction. Requiring no preparation or previous knowledge will help first-time attendees as well as veteran participants. Information before, during, and after the game will be available on the conference wiki. A repository of materials from the game will be linked to from <http://gaming.ala.org> when available, under a Creative Commons license that allows any library to customize and run the game for its own patrons.

### *ALA 2008 Annual Conference Wiki*

<http://wikis.ala.org/annual2008>

### *Downloadable materials for the 2008 Annual Conference big game*

<http://gaming.ala.org>

This is just one area ALA is exploring to engage members and help them connect with one another in a more interactive and playful way. The proliferation of gaming platforms—mobile gaming on cell phones and handhelds, the Internet, on iPods, etc.—will only expand further the reach and potential of gaming. As libraries examine how best to incorporate videogame services, it is important to remember that these are just one piece of the gaming pie and that a broader approach may achieve the library's goals. For this reason alone, it is important librarians understand and track the full breadth of gaming.

## Talking Points

- Big games, which take place in the real world and use everyday items, help us rethink the world around us and are gaining in popularity.
- Big games represent an inclusive approach to gaming that can maximize physical resources without requiring a large financial outlay from the library or game players.
- ALA will be running a big game at its annual conference in June 2008. Afterwards, libraries will be able to download materials from the game and customize them in order to run their own versions in their own communities.

### *Greg Trefry's presentation from the 2007 Symposium*

[http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Big\\_Fun%2C\\_Big\\_Learning:\\_Transforming\\_the\\_World\\_through\\_Play](http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Big_Fun%2C_Big_Learning:_Transforming_the_World_through_Play)

### *Come Out & Play Festival*

[www.comeoutandplay.org](http://www.comeoutandplay.org)

### *ARGNet: Alternate Reality Gaming Network*

[www.argn.com](http://www.argn.com)

### *Learn about Big Games*

[www.projectnml.org/exemplars/07biggames](http://www.projectnml.org/exemplars/07biggames)

### *Big Games: Playing in the Streets*

[www.adobe.com/designcenter/thinktank/trefry.html](http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/thinktank/trefry.html)

### *Big Games Design Contest*

[www.plan.ca/belong/BIG/blog.html](http://www.plan.ca/belong/BIG/blog.html)

## Notes

1. Nick Reid, Web site of Hot Books, Home page, [www.htbks.com/index.php](http://www.htbks.com/index.php), and About page, [www.htbks.com/about.php](http://www.htbks.com/about.php), (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).
2. Frank Lantz, as quoted in Bonnie Ruberg, "Big Reality: A Chat with 'Big Game' Designer Frank Lantz," Aug. 10, 2006, on the Gamasutra Web site, [http://gamasutra.com/features/20060810/ruberg\\_01.shtml](http://gamasutra.com/features/20060810/ruberg_01.shtml) (accessed Jan. 21, 2008).
3. area/code Web site, <http://playareacode.com/manifesto.html> (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).
4. Steve Peters, quoted in Daniel Terdiman, "I Love Bees Game a Surprise Hit," *Wired*, Oct. 18, 2004, [www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2004/10/65365](http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2004/10/65365) (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).
5. Greg Trefry, "Big Fun, Big Learning: Transforming the World through Play (keynote address, ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium, Chicago, July 22-24, 2007), [http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Big\\_Fun%2C\\_Big\\_Learning:\\_Transforming\\_the\\_World\\_through\\_Play](http://gaming.techsource.ala.org/index.php/Big_Fun%2C_Big_Learning:_Transforming_the_World_through_Play) (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).
6. "About the Game," on the Cruel 2 B Kind Web site, <http://cruelgame.com/about> (accessed Jan. 21, 2008).
7. Nick Reid, Web site of Hot Books, Home page, [www.htbks.com/index.php](http://www.htbks.com/index.php) (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).
8. Nick Reid, Web site of Hot Books, About page, [www.htbks.com/about.php](http://www.htbks.com/about.php) (accessed Jan. 13, 2008).