

Conclusion

What Librarians Can Learn from Gamers

Hopefully, the research and case studies presented in this issue have led you to reconsider your assumptions about video games and your mental models about library services. I've identified several different intersections of service between gaming and libraries, but there has also been an underlying current I feel the need to explicitly address for librarians: I believe those of us advocating gaming for libraries need to clearly spell out *what librarians can learn from gamers*—in order to improve library services to all users, not just to young people.

Clearly, those individuals pioneering gaming in libraries are using the gamer ethos to do it:

- they are forging ahead with a service without waiting to make it “perfect”—they use trial-and-error methods to implement a service, evaluate it, learn from what isn't working, and improve it;
- they take risks because they are willing to fail, knowing that failure can result in success;
- they turn to others for their expertise when necessary; and
- they are flexible and can adapt to change.

In contrast, the dominant culture in libraries is one of risk-avoidance, maintenance of the status quo, hierarchy, and fear of failure. When discussing new (or even old) services in meetings (that tend to last way too long), one of the phrases I've most commonly heard is, “We've always done it that way.” This mentality needs to change—or else librarians risk relegating libraries to the past. Although we do not need to adopt every lesson or principle of the gaming world, some are definitely worthwhile and relevant to library environments.

At the 2005 Gaming in Libraries Symposium held in Chicago, OCLC's VP for member services George

Needham provided the keynote (see figure 28). By learning about gamers and their experiences, Needham noted, *librarians can learn from gamers* and, hopefully, begin implementing at least some of the principles listed in chapter 2 of this report. “I want to suggest that what librarians can learn from gamers is not about tearing out the children's or young adult's space to create an arcade,” Needham stated. “Or how gamers can show librarians how to reach the highest level in *EverQuest*. . . . Instead, I want to talk about how gamers can show librarians a new way of developing, sharing, and extending knowledge.”

Needham then offered specific things librarians can do and think about to begin adapting to a world of gamers:

- Play an online game once in a while.
- Stock cheat books in your library.
- Offer services on instant messaging and use text messaging.
- Throw a LAN party in your library.
- Bring “Digital Natives” into your planning process (even if they don't have an MLS!).
- Respect non-print learning and remember the non-print learner.
- Move away from the idea that libraries are about print *or* media. We can be both.
- We need to figure out how to offer multiple paths, many formats, and different platforms.
- Rethink where we offer services.
- Provide shortcuts (like a strategy guide) rather than just training.
- Redesign our spaces to offer different zones for different users (quiet spaces for nongamers and users who need space to study, noisy

spaces for gamers and others who want to collaborate, etc.).¹

Gaming in Libraries Symposium 2005 Presentations

George Needham

<http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/presentations/georgeneedham.pdf>

Beth Galloway

<http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/presentations/bethgalloway.pdf>

By no means is Needham the only other librarian offering ideas for aligning library services more closely with gamers. Beth Galloway (see figure 29), a trainer/consultant at the Metrowest Massachusetts Regional Library System, offers seven things you can do tomorrow to make your library more welcoming to gamers (some of which are similar suggestions Beck and Wade offer to business leaders in *Got Game*).² They are applicable beyond just gaming and are general attitudes librarians should possess in order to adapt to the new digital world.

1. Use games to do readers' advisory.
2. Be a strategy guide.
3. Embrace your inner technogeek.
4. Be flexible.
5. Plan change.
6. Immerse yourself in pop culture . . . especially video game culture.
7. Try some games!³

Because Galloway believes that games are “just another way to tell stories, and libraries are all about stories, in books, on audio, in films,” she encourages librarians to integrate gaming into traditional services such as readers' advisory.⁴

These are just some of the ways in which librarians can start integrating the gamer ethos into the profession. In addition, librarians need to literally change many of our attitudes in order to be more flexible in our services. For example, we need to implement—from the top down—a work culture that makes it okay to fail. Obviously failure is not the goal, but if librarians are to take risks to improve and enhance existing services and implement new ones, those in director and library supervisor positions not only have to be willing to fail, but they also have to be willing to let their subordinates fail.

In most libraries, either because they are publicly funded or receive funding from a parent institution that requires expenditure justification, there seems to exist an

aversion to taking risks that could be deemed as wasting that money. Although this concern must be taken into consideration, all of the case studies presented in this report show that adding gaming services to libraries requires a leap of faith—but, for those library directors and boards willing to let their staff members try the jump, this leap can offer immense, at times immeasurable, rewards.

In the introduction, I noted that games throughout history have shared a set of common threads:

- Games test our problem-solving skills;
- Games are inclusive;
- Games create community;
- Games facilitate learning;
- Games provide fields for practice of leadership and team skills; and
- Games develop identity.



Figure 28: George Needham, VP at OCLC for member services, presenting at the December 2005 Gaming in Libraries Symposium, Chicago.



Figure 29: Beth Galloway, a trainer/consultant at the Metrowest Massachusetts Regional Library System, presenting the December 2005 Gaming in Libraries Symposium, Chicago.

As mentioned by so many of the librarians interviewed for this publication, the future is all about opportunities and weaving together threads, both old and new. Librarians can harness the benefits of all of these threads to take the best of what gaming has to offer in order to provide new services, enhance existing ones, and improve our own processes and work environments. Dismissed for years as being a waste of time in general but specifically for having no relevance for libraries, gaming, we can now recognize, provides a wealth of intersections. In short, I—as well as many individuals providing gaming services to their patrons—believe that gaming has given our profession a surge in new ideas and enthusiasm.

From an early age, gamers learn James Paul Gee’s “probe, hypothesize, reprobe, rethink” cycle until it is ingrained. By learning about gaming and from gamers, we can be more explicit in adopting this same cycle and adapting it to decision making and implementation in libraries. Trial and error *should* be the norm, for how else will we learn what doesn’t work and fix the problems?

This requires an atmosphere of trust on the part of library administrators—another commonality you have seen throughout the presented case studies. Every person interviewed for this publication stated that support from administration to try *something new*, and potentially fail, was critical to the success of the project. It is possible—and even desirable—to experiment with old and new services alike, hitting the reset button until we get it right.

In fact, if I were to list those elements that represent the best recipe for success for implementing gaming services in libraries, it would include:

- Support from administration.
- Willingness to try and experiment.
- Involving patrons in decisions and trusting them.
- Flexibility; for example, being able to move forward without “death by committee.”
- Doing what is possible rather than attempting too much or not trying anything because it won’t be perfect.

- Having a gamer on staff (an expert) helps, but you also must be willing to trust their expertise.

What does this list reveal about the characteristics we librarians need to look for in future librarians and leaders? How can we foster work environments that maximize the kinds of collaboration, innovation, and imagination that have allowed librarians to change mental models and implement such a broad spectrum of gaming services in libraries?

In reality, the list above does not apply only to gaming. Rather, these elements are necessary for the success of any improvement to an existing service or any implementation of new ones. When viewed in a larger context, we can see that gaming is a service model upon which we can build for the future of library services.

As Beck and Wade note in *Got Game*, “You will confront surprises and difficulties that you are not prepared for. But the sum of those risks and dangers, by definition, cannot make the quest foolish.”⁵

Notes

1. George Needham, “Gaming, Learning, and Libraries” (presentation, Gaming in Libraries Symposium, Chicago, December 6, 2005), <http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/presentations/georgeneedham.pdf> (accessed August 27, 2006), 29–38.
2. John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2004).
3. Beth Gallaway, “What Librarians Can Do for Gamers (Other Than Programming & Collections)” (presentation, Gaming in Libraries Symposium, December 5–6, 2005), <http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/presentations/bethgallaway.pdf> (accessed August 27, 2006), 2.
4. Ibid.
5. Beck and Wade, *Got Game*, 44.