

Case Studies

School Libraries

Downers Grove South High School Library

So far, it seems like I've been focusing a lot on how public libraries can implement gaming services, but many of the same techniques could work for school libraries, too. And as authors Gee and Johnson note in their respective titles *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* and *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (see notes in chapter 1), there is a lot of potential for gaming to revolutionize schools and education. What if it started in the library?

Many media specialists have trouble understanding how gaming can fit into a school library setting. Many school budgets are already at bare minimum. In addition, there is an increasing trend for many institutions to *not employ* professional staff in the school library. Even those school libraries that do hire professional media specialists or librarians are having a difficult time trying to teach information literacy to the Google generation. School librarians, administrators, and media specialists may wonder: "How, when, and where would gaming ever fly in the restrictive school environment?" and "How would we ever defend letting students *play games* when they *should be studying*?" But, as cited in chapter 2, Bell and Brown's *Gaming in the Media Center Made Easy* illustrates this is not the first time school libraries have considered using games.

At Downers Grove South High School (DGSHS) in Downers Grove, Illinois, library staff members have seized the initiative and used the gamers' ethos of experimentation, risk taking, and trial-and-error to introduce gaming in the library. In the last year, members of the DGSHS staff have tried two different approaches to introduce gaming to students.

In 2005, the first attempt was a very simple, straightforward conversion of an existing paper-based quiz (that tested students' knowledge of where things are located in the library) into an online game. It's really just an online quiz with some fancy graphics, but it helps demonstrate how much more engaging even standard types of tests can be when presented as a more interactive and proactive way (actually having to click on the answer and advancing to the next screen) to learn.

DGSHS Rags to Riches Online Game/Quia
www.quia.com/rr/124501.html

Quia, "Where Learning Takes You"
www.quia.com

Rags to Riches is the online game/quiz that DGSHS staff members created, and it's located on the third-party Quia Web site (www.quia.com/rr/124501.html). For \$49 per year, Quia makes it easy for anyone to create interactive quizzes. The third-party provider also hosts them, so you don't need to worry about bandwidth or security issues.

When classes come into the media center, DGSHS staff members have the students sit at computers and "play the game." Librarian Mindy Null hoped to make the traditional quizzes more fun by converting them to an online format, but even she was surprised when the kids started getting competitive, comparing scores, and boasting about winning.

This project was such a success the members of the library's staff decided to try something bigger for National Library Week (NLW) this year (2006). After



Figure 12: Librarian and students at the DGSHS Library's day-long gaming event at the library (April 2006).

much discussion, they implemented a day-long gaming event in the library (although the event had to be held a couple of weeks after NLW due to timing conflicts). This was the first time that students—not just faculty and staff members—were included in celebrating NLW at the school (see figure 12).

They started out with a very ambitious plan—gaming competitions that would be facilitated through consoles and hand-held devices—for the students. But their plan had to be scaled back for a variety of reasons; the librarians' lack of knowledge about gaming was certainly an issue, Null told me. "We found that we knew so little about this world (even after attending conferences and our own research) that we really had to scale back. We decided to start with what was manageable: online and board games," she explained.

It's important to note that this is a major benefit of gaming services in libraries—you can scale your program to your library's needs (big event, small event, inexpensive setup, video games, board games, and so on). You can start small, at almost no cost to the library, and then you and your staff members can build on it. It's not like starting Bookmobile service or implementing a new catalog. Do what works best for your library, and realize that you can expand it as the need arises (or, more likely, as funding becomes available).

The Downers Grove South librarians began by scaling back their plan. They assigned specific responsibilities to certain staff members, and then they scheduled the day's events. Rather than use console games, they decided to allow students to play online games on the library's computers. This meant talking with members of the IT staff and convincing them to unblock the game sites for one day. Although the librarians expected IT to resist this request (due to security concerns), they were pleasantly surprised to find the IT staff more than willing to help (possibly because many in IT were/are gamers).



Figure 13: DGSHS library staff members brought in board games for a gaming event in the library.

Next, they began determining the different online and board games that would be offered. With a maximum budget of a thousand dollars for the entire event, purchasing a slew of games and equipment was out of the question. Instead, library staff members brought in their board games from home—Battleship, checkers, chess, Chutes & Ladders (see figure 13), Guess Who, Hangman, Hungry Hungry Hippos, Jenga, Monopoly, Operation, Scrabble, trivia games, and Uno. According to Null, "Our biggest surprise was how popular the board games were. Many of the kids and faculty stood in line to play Hungry Hungry Hippos and Operation—ignoring the computers. It was rewarding to see how pleased and excited they were at seeing that these games were available." (See figure 14.)

The gaming day proceeded relatively smoothly for a first-time event. Students were given tickets with gaming-event times listed on them ahead of time, and the staff members talked to teachers about timing for bringing in whole classes. At the conclusions of their scheduled gaming slots, students were instructed to write their names on the tickets, which they then deposited into drawings for prizes. This ensured that everyone who attended had an opportunity to receive a prize for gaming, whether he or she won an event or not. Here is a chronological list of the day's event:

1. Having already set up a plan with the school's techies, IT staff came to the library to remove all game blocks from the library's computers for that day.
2. The school's staff and faculty members were allowed to participate in whatever way they felt most comfortable. A special area was set up, and in this area, organizers placed gift bags for each player and articles for staff and faculty members. Many staff members chose to participate and play games with the students.
3. Organizers (who had already purchased snacks and

put them into bags) placed the snack bags out for participants. Candy was also distributed at the end of each period.

4. Prizes were set on tables near the library's graphic-novels section. Throughout the day, students were encouraged to write their names on the tickets, so they could drop them in the drawing pools, which were placed near the prizes they hoped to win. At the end of the day, winning tickets were drawn, and the winners were announced the following week.
5. Organizers played music (with game show themes) throughout the day.
6. Some teachers brought in each of their classes and let them play in the library for the hour-long class periods.
7. A separate area was set up for taking pictures of students, staff members, and faculty members during the gaming events. It is tradition for DGSHS library staff members to take pictures during the NLW celebrations, and staff members look forward to receiving one every year. This year these pictures were taken in front of a Twister backdrop (see figure 15).

As for staff members' reactions to the event, Null and other librarians expected some skeptics, and indeed there were a few. Overall, though, Null and others were "surprised at the ease of the programming. All our other programs have involved much more effort. As a school library, we needed to recognize and be involved in this trend. Our program was extremely cheap because we did not invest in gaming equipment. I realize that \$1000 is still a large amount for most school libraries; however, much of what we did could be eliminated. The students would have been happy just knowing they were able to play games in the library," Null noted. The bulk of the DGSHS Library's costs went to prizes (\$300) and supplies (\$600), such as gift bags for staff, photos, board games, and T-shirts.

In regard to the production of the event, staff time was by far the biggest resource devoted to it. "It was somewhat time consuming, but compared to other programs, it was not extraordinary," Null estimated. "Most of our time was spent shopping and researching appropriate game slides."

The event was such a success the librarians hope to do it again next year, and they want to make it an annual event separate from celebrating National Library Week. Reaction from both faculty members and students was very positive. One side benefit to providing a communal space for gamers in the school library turned out to be the chance to change individuals' perceptions about the library. One faculty member left the day's event saying it was one of "the best lessons I had all year."

Null also noted that because it is a high school library, gaming-event organizers' very first step was to put

together a plan listing reasons why the library staff should implement it. Then they had to take it to administration for approval—a formidable task for most. But the librarians at DGSHS have spent years educating the school's administrators about the importance of media centers. Because they have actively cultivated "a reputation for being professional and thorough" when they broach library-based programming with the administration, the librarians have developed a very strong rapport with members of the DGSHS administration.

It's no surprise, then, to discover that DGSHS Library was named an American Association of School Librarians' 2005 National School Media Program of the Year Award winner for the library's innovative and collaborative work. This library staff's reputation goes well beyond the DGSHS building's walls (see figure 16).



Figure 14: Downers Grove South High School students playing Hungry Hungry Hippos in the library.



Figure 15: Downers Grove South High School staff members posing for pictures for the DGSHS Library National Library Week gaming event (April 2006).

Null acknowledged the years of deliberate team building and image cultivation helped the librarians “sell” the gaming idea to others. In fact, the librarians were somewhat shocked at how little resistance there was to the idea. Still, it’s important to remember that the staff did its homework.

When we initially decided to do this and divided up responsibilities, public relations was one of them. Two librarians were assigned to “bolstering our arsenal” of why we should be incorporating gaming into a school-library program and how it fit. We had researched the topic for quite a while. So we were able to provide the administration with pertinent information before we began. We used a lot of the information from the 2005 Gaming in Libraries Symposium that had been held in Chicago, Illinois, in December 2005. We ordered books that discussed the impact of gaming on learning (James Paul Gee’s book was extremely helpful). All this information was incorporated into our publications, conversations, programming, etc.

We are lucky, because our administrators are astute and knowledgeable and they track current trends. They understand the importance of supporting educational endeavors that have merit.

Ironically, most of the issues we encountered were technical. Removing the filtering systems, downloading necessary software, how to get around existing profiles, etc. The surprise for us was how willing our tech support staff was to cooperate. This was an anticipated stumbling block that did not really materialize. Maybe it



Figure 16: Downers Grove South High School Library staff members on game day.

was because they loved the whole gaming idea or, once again, maybe it was due to the relationship building and involving them in the process.¹

Of all the research the librarians compiled and the supporting arguments they had ready at their fingertips, no particular article or point seemed to resonate more than any other in the discussions with administrators or IT; however, Null shared the following starter talking points for other school librarians to use.

- Acknowledge that a school library provides a wide variety of services using a large quantity of media.
- Gaming provides a bridge between public libraries and school libraries related to current trends.
- Gaming provides a relevant service to our clientele—meeting their needs and interests.
- Gaming allows the library to act as a resource that builds community.
- Present your program as a way for the library [to be] a place that embraces fun, camaraderie, and new technologies.
- Demonstrate that we as librarians are knowledgeable and capable regarding “what is coming down the pike.”²

When asked why she thought media centers should invest in gaming, Null responded:

As a school librarian, this was a small investment for us. It could almost be done for no cost, so I think what we did could be done by almost anyone, even a solo school librarian with a small budget. Most of the board games we used were those we had at home. It was an event for which there was a great deal of return for very little investment. For many students, it provided an opportunity for them to view the library as a place that offers a variety of services and understands their world; especially those students who don’t value the traditional purposes of a library.

It was an opportunity for us to interact with students in a nontraditional setting. If we had done nothing more than let students in to play games, most of them would have been thrilled and the PR is well worth it. Anytime that a library can **create community**, it is worthwhile. This event definitely did that!³

Although Null did not note any major downside to either the online game (the *Rags to Riches* quiz) or the in-library event, she said she wishes they had done a “bet-

ter” job of getting a wider range of people to participate, especially staff members. Next year, she hopes to find a way to “engage some of the more seasoned staff.” And if she could give a fellow school librarian just one tip to replicate what they did, it would be to “start small and implement what is manageable for your situation. If you know very little about gaming, ask your students for advice!”⁴

Gaming Night at North Hunterdon Regional High School

Downers Grove South High School is not alone in the push to add gaming in school libraries. In fact, it wasn’t the first media center to do this. Ginny Konefal, school librarian at the North Hunterdon Regional High School in New Jersey, has been holding game nights in the library since 2003. As noted on the Pop Goes the Library blog, the program is run on a shoestring budget and involves the students every step of the way.

The entire program (with the exception of the LCD projectors, owned by the school, which project the games onto cafeteria walls) is BYO: students bring their own computers, game consoles, and games with them.

The entire program is teen-run—teens are in charge of mapping out appropriate use of electricity & plugs (thereby eliminating the possibility of blowing fuses); setting up all video, sound, and controller connections; soliciting discounted food from local delivery services; preparing sign-up sheets for tournament play; and clean up afterwards.

Both team & individual play [are] encouraged.

Contrary to popular misconception about games—that they appeal only to loner antisocial guys, that they are dangerous—Game Night at this high school attracts over 100 students from diverse social groups (we’re talking all races, both genders, sports aficionados, computer whizzes, quiet kids, loud kids—you name it) all of whom play nicely with others. Kids who felt like loners find a crowd they never knew existed, and teens who are quieter take leadership roles.⁵

Konefal gave a presentation about her quarterly gaming program at the 2005 New Jersey Library Association conference. Her PowerPoint presentation is available at www.nhvweb.net/NHHS/MediaCenter/Gaming%20Night%20Ppt%202005.ppt.

Pop Goes the Library: Using Pop Culture to Make the Library Better
www.popgoesthelibrary.com

High School Gaming Night by Ginny Konefal
www.nhvweb.net/NHHS/MediaCenter/Gaming%20Night%20Ppt%202005.ppt

Support Services for Games in Education

If James Paul Gee is correct—that games can help revolutionize how students learn and instructors teach—you will continue to see the integration of video games into the curriculum. Although this is a tremulous prospect for parents and educators alike, the use of commercial games in classrooms is increasing—for example, *SimCity* can be used in social studies classes, *Age of Mythology* and *Civilization* in history classes, and *Rollercoaster Tycoon* in physics classes. Like these games (that may involve social change and science lessons), it is also likely developers will continue to produce games that look like commercial games but are aimed at the education market.

For example, the company Muzzy Lane Software has created the video game *Making History*. This game teaches students about the political and economic causes of World War II. A trial run of the software in a history classroom showed amazing results, as noted in a May 2006 press release:

Under the watchful tutelage of David McDivitt, an enterprising Social Studies teacher at Oak Hill High School in Converse, Ind., 64 sophomore students played *Making History*, the historical simulation game from Muzzy Lane Software. Another group of students used their standard history textbooks along with the usual lectures and assignments that define a typical day in high school. . . .

One group—the students who played *Making History*—learned more facts and wrote more sophisticated essays in tests conducted after a week of game play. According to Mr. McDivitt, *Making History* also addresses several key components of Indiana’s state curriculum guidelines for secondary education. . . .

Mr. McDivitt applied a common set of questions to both groups of students prior to game week, and then tested the students with the same questions after each group had completed their learning cycles.

What he found was a noticeable and in some cases stunning difference in the degree to which the game-play students improved compared with the textbook students.

Here are some of the highlights (percentages indicate the relative increase in performance from the pre-lesson test to the post-lesson test):

- Identify the countries of Europe on a blank map outline:
Game Players: 70%
Non-Game Players: 45%
- Explain the significance of the 1938 Munich Conference:
Game Players: 90%
Non-Game Players: 55%
- Define the reasons for the start of World War II:
Game Players: 67%
Non-Game Players: 35%

“I am not saying that games are the panacea for all of education’s problems,” says Mr. McDivitt. “But there is no doubt anymore that the right videogame integrated properly with traditional curriculum has a clear and meaningful impact on the quality of learning.”⁶

Considering this social studies class example, how effective do you think a librarian, standing in front of the class teaching bibliographic instruction, can truly be? Surely it is time for our profession to examine how we can change our own practices to better serve the needs of the multimodal, multitasking gaming generation.

If nothing else, we can better match our current offerings to the new learning styles and interactions of gamers. In “Meet the Gamers,” Squire and Steinkuehler note, “Every time we meet with students, we ask who has checked a book out from the library based on an interest generated through game play. Roughly half say yes. In fact, nearly every student we’ve met who has played *Age of Empires*, *Civilization*, or *Rome: Total War* has checked out a book on related topics as a result.”⁷

Sid Meier’s Civilization III
www.civiii.com

Age of Empires III by Ensemble Studios
www.ageofempires3.com

Rome: Total War by The Creative Assembly
www.totalwar.com

Perhaps new marketing opportunities are arising—if only we will open our minds enough to see them.

Finally, it’s not just the “thinking” games that spark students’ imaginations and give them new ways to learn. In schools across the United States, the Xbox version of *Dance Dance Revolution* is being installed in cafeterias and gymnasiums for use during lunch periods, study halls, and even in physical-education classes. In fact, a pilot project in West Virginia, which installed the game in 20 public schools, was so successful the program is being expanded to include 157 middle schools, and eventually it will be implemented at all 753 public schools across the state. The target age group is students 10–14 who do not like to participate in traditional sports, but who still need an option for exercise and physical education. The *DDR* games will not replace physical-education classes for students, but they will be an additional option for the public school system’s 280,000 students.⁸

Again, librarians need to ask, “What happens to students’ perceptions and expectations about learning and instruction when the history class and the phys-ed class incorporate gaming into their curricula?” Is it possible that, eventually, the library will be the only department in the school still trying to teach and serve using only methods developed in the eighteenth century?

Talking Points

- Media specialists can take advantage of the same inexpensive techniques as other libraries to implement gaming. Let the students bring in their own equipment, or use online games to start out and build from there until more resources become available.
- Students are experts about gaming—let them help you! Involving students from the beginning can build new types of relationships and connections.
- Gaming can also highlight the school library as “Third Place” (as discussed in chapter 1).
- Adding gaming in the media center can show both students and faculty the library staff “has a clue” and the library is a place to just “hang out” and have fun—it’s not all work and no play. It helps build community, something school librarians often have a difficult time doing due to budget and staffing constraints.
- Honor the skills students have developed as a result of gaming—instead of focusing only on getting them to read books. This will help build their individual levels of confidence and will show them the librarians and media specialists care about what matters to them.
- Gaming is already seeping into education, and such external pressures are beginning to force us to ask how librarians will support these curricula. How will we integrate our own materials and teaching of information literacy into such an environment?

Notes

1. From interviews with Mindy Null, librarians at Downers Grove South High School Library, June 19, 2006, and July 19, 2006.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sophie Brookover, "Games @ Your Library," Pop Goes the Library Blog (April 12, 2005), www.popgoesthelibrary.com/2005/04/games-your-library.html (accessed August 23, 2006).
6. Muzzy Lane Software, "Scholastic Impact of Video Games" (company press release, May 9, 2006), www.muzzylane.com/news/detail.php?id=79 (accessed August 23, 2006).
7. Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler, "Meet the Gamers," *Library Journal* (April 15, 2005), www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA516033.html (accessed August 22, 2006).
8. "U.S. Pupils to Dance Themselves Fit," BBC News (January 27, 2006), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4653434.stm> (accessed August 23, 2006).