Broadening Our Definition of Gaming

Tabletop Games

[Margaret] Edwards expressed disapproval, however, of one NYPL branch where the librarians [in the mid-1930s] had enticed "juvenile delinquents" into the library with chess and board games. "This was the one activity I observed that I could not accept," she said. —Virginia A. Walter and Elaine Meyers[1]

Since 2005, the emergence of videogaming in libraries has moved from peripheral status to mainstream discussion within the profession so quickly that it has replaced the more traditional connotation of the term *gaming* for some people. On the one hand, this can be a good thing if the immediate connotation for *gaming* is "[casino] gambling," and indeed libraries often have to explain to funders, auditors, and administrators of parent institutions what type of gaming they are doing. On the other hand, this has meant that as more people learn about the benefits of videogames in libraries, our discussions may have lost sight of the historical use of games in libraries that paved the way for integrating new ones.

For example, chess clubs are no strangers to our institutions. Many school and public libraries have provided organization of instruction and play, not just physical space in which children can engage in what everyone would consider to be educational gaming. As the quote beginning this chapter shows, chess and other board games were used in libraries as far back as 1933 with much the same disapproval now associated with videogames. Some libraries still have an inventory of board and card games on hand for younger patrons to play, although fewer seem to offer these for circulation. (It's interesting to ponder why we restrict this play to occurring only in the library; could part of the reason be to encourage social and educational play within our physical buildings?)

Imagine a library *not* offering chess today because it would draw "juvenile delinquents." And yet this is one reason cited against offering videogames as a service. Are the two really so different?

Even though the service of providing tabletop games has been around for quite some time, how libraries implement it hasn't changed much. In fact, the greatest change may just be that sometimes the games are entered in the online catalog now, available for checkout and reserve. In the United States, these types of games are still popular and are even enjoying a renaissance (witness the recent spike in popularity of Sudoku among adults), but much of the emphasis in the media and in the entertainment industries has shifted towards video and computer gaming. That doesn't mean, however, that we should abandon other types of games, especially when they are more compelling than ever.

Dr. Scott Nicholson is an associate professor at the Information Institute at Syracuse University. In his day job at Syracuse, Nicholson has started the "Library Game Lab," a research laboratory at the Information Institute that will explore the effectiveness of different types of gaming activities with different socioeconomic and age groups in libraries. He is passionate about this subject in part because he is a gamer himself. Nicholson runs an extremely popular Web site called Board Games with Scott, a series of video reviews of modern tabletop games that users can watch on the site or subscribe to as a podcast. Though the reviews are chiefly aimed at a general audience, he also provides advice and recommendations for librarians seeking to incorporate these games into their services.

Board Games with Scott
http://boardgameswithscott.com

Figure 1
Scott Nicholson's popular Board Games with Scott Web site, where he posts video reviews of new tabletop games.

Case Study 1
by Scott Nicholson

Modern Board Games: It's Not a Monopoly Anymore

For some time, libraries have provided forms of leisure other than recreational reading. Many would be surprised to learn about British libraries' supplying recreational activities as far back as 1824 as a safer alternative to public houses and other forms of inexpensive entertainment.[2] Libraries have continued to provide forms of recreation, and board games have been one traditional form of non-book entertainment.

Many libraries have a shelf of old board games sitting in the children's section. Boxes of *Candy Land, Monopoly, Stratego,* and *Risk* sit waiting to entertain players, immersing them in a different world. Many adults in the United States no longer turn to these games for entertainment, feeling they have grown out of these childhood pastimes. Board games have fallen by the wayside as entertainment as members of the family each turn to their separate screens for enjoyment.

This isn't true around the world. Germans have embraced a variety of games as family and adult activities for decades. In the mid-1990s, games from Germany began to make their way over to U.S. shores and have made a significant impact on game design and the num-

ber of interesting board games currently available for play. At the same time, the games focused on combat that have been developed in the United States have traveled elsewhere. The result is that a growing number of game companies are either producing games imported from overseas or developing new games inspired by both an American and a European perspective.

How Modern Board Games Are Different

What are some of the aspects that many of these modern games have that make them different from American classics like *Monopoly* or *Risk?*

- **The focus is not on player elimination,** but rather the game ends at some point and each player's performance is measured. Player elimination creates games that can go on and on, providing fun only for the people who are still playing. A good social activity should allow everyone to be involved for the duration of the activity and not force some people to sit out of the game after they have been knocked out. Most of these modern board games have some type of an ending condition, and once that has been met, players have some way of calculating how successful they were in achieving the goals of the game. Some games have a specific goal the players are driving for, while others have a scoretrack tracking the performance of players throughout the game.
- **There is not as much "down time,"** a term used for periods in a game where players are not involved and are simply waiting for their turn. Many modern board games use techniques that involve players frequently with the game. Some games employ regular trading or auctions between players. Other games break up a game turn into small actions, which sometimes are simultaneous, that engage players frequently.
- **There are more interesting decisions.** Many of these games provide players with the chance to make multiple interesting decisions that bring in the chance to employ different strategies or tactics. Dice, if used, tend to be used in a way that players can make decisions based upon the probability of different combinations coming up. Luck tends to be employed through the drawing of cards, which provides a more controlled random selection experience upon which to base decisions than dice allow. The "roll-and-move" mechanic commonly employed in games produced in America over the last several decades is rarely seen in a modern board game.
- **There are multiple paths to victory.** Another feature common to many of these games is that there

are several different (and valid) ways to achieve the goals needed to win the game. This can occur when a game uses a point system that rewards different types of decisions. This makes for a very replayable game as players can explore different paths each time.

See Appendix A for specific recommendations for libraries of games that utilize these new techniques.

Challenges and Suggestions

Some of the difficulties with modern games are complexity and cost. The rule books can be complex and overwhelming so that some games can't be easily learned by a quick reading of the rules just before play. Many of the boards and components for these games are much more detailed than classic American games, and the print runs are much smaller; therefore, the games are much more expensive than the games at a large department store. Replacement pieces can be more difficult to come by, but as producers of these games become aware of the library market for modern board games, it is hoped that they will offer replacement pieces or commonly supply extra pieces with games.

A number of online resources have been developed over the last few years to support the board-game hobby. The best resource is a community-based site called BoardGameGeek (see the gray box at the end of this chapter). This site combines a giant user-submitted database of board games with metadata, images, reviews, and discussions for each game (and could be used as a model for a more interactive library catalog) with forums on many subtopics of the hobby.

While the reviews and player aids on "the Geek" may be helpful, the real resource at BoardGameGeek is the community. Librarians looking to improve their board-game offerings can turn to the Geek to find local gamers. Many communities have some type of regular game group, and if they do not, there are probably several board-gamers who would love to start one.

Librarians could visit the Geek and search user profiles for board-gamers in their area and invite them into the library. These individuals are typically happy to teach others their games and would love being organizers for a library program on board games. This would allow the library and board-gaming groups to join forces to expose people to the variety of modern board games. The group would grow in membership and draw people to the library.

Conclusion

This brief article just touches the surface of the depth of tabletop games that have come out in the last decade.

Some say that we are in a new golden age of board games, as the variety of designs and experiences continues to grow at a rapid pace. Once players try some of these newer, more interactive game designs, they will be less likely to be interested in some of the older classics. These new games encourage interaction, involvement, strategy, and communication, and they allow players to make interesting decisions more frequently than older games.

The key to a successful board-gaming event is to match the game to the players. Just like matching a reader to a series of books, the next task of libraries is to serve in the role of "gamer's advisory," being aware of the variety of gaming experiences and matching the game to the player. Modern board games are one type of game to add to the repertoire of a Gamer's Advisory Librarian.

Nicholson was so persuasive at the 2007 Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium that Christopher Harris, Coordinator of the School Library System at the Genesee Valley Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), was inspired to help implement board-game programs at the school libraries in his system. Keeping a close eye on educational achievement and learning, Harris seized a grant opportunity to start what has already become a successful program.

Case Study 2, by Christopher Harris

As the Coordinator of the School Library System of Genesee Valley BOCES in western New York, I had been thinking about introducing games and gaming to our member libraries for the past two years. It just never seemed as if the situation was right to get started. I picked up copies of the *Dungeons and Dragons* sets for libraries at the American Association for School Librarians (AASL) two years ago, but that was just not a good choice of a game to start with, given the potential for controversy. The research on gaming from James Paul Gee, Steven Johnson, and others shows that there is an incredible amount of learning that takes place while we play games.[3] The challenge in a school environment is helping nongamers move past the verb *play* to see the learning that is happening. As a school administrator myself, I knew that attempting to introduce gaming to principals and superintendents who are so focused on high-stakes testing would be difficult. The only hope for getting this program off the ground was to make sure we launched with a set of games that had strong curriculum ties and could be seen to invoke obvious learning. I had the goal, but for two years I didn't have the games.

In July 2007, I presented at the ALA TechSource Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium and was introduced to a number of exciting and highly intellectual games by keynote presenter Scott Nicholson, who vlogs about games at Board Games with Scott. I returned to the library system ready to start. By October we had completed our research and purchased ten board and card game titles, with thirty-one games in all. After a bit more than a month of our learning the games over lunches, we launched in early December with a very successful game workshop. Librarians from fifteen of our twenty-two districts came, and everyone had a wonderful time learning about gaming and trying some of the games. A number of librarians told me after the workshop that they had attended knowing nothing about gaming and having no desire to play games; they were there just because it was a morning workshop before a required afternoon meeting. Something happened, however, when they heard about the research behind gaming and had a chance to play the games we selected. Suddenly they understood, they told me, and more important, they wanted games to take back to their libraries. Thirty of our thirty-one games were checked out at the end of the workshop.

Though other libraries may be offering gaming programs as entertainment or as a chance for community interaction, school libraries must always remain focused on our end goal of student academic achievement. This means that our gaming program has to support learning. We are meeting this goal by providing games that align with New York State learning standards or at least provoke inquiry and involve higher-order thinking and use of library and information skills. To start the game library, we selected ten games that we thought could be defended as being intellectual learning experiences, while also being authentically fun to play. We bought multiple copies of the games, four each in most cases, and ended up with thirty-one games at a cost of just under $500.

Our goal as a regional library system is to meet the needs of our member libraries through support services. This means that we are not offering any game programming directly, but rather are providing the games and professional development that will allow our member libraries to provide gaming. For our kickoff workshop, we leveled and aligned the games to provide some initial recommendations for appropriate age ranges and ways to describe the learning taking place. We also facilitated a discussion about possible ways to use gaming in school libraries. Our member librarians are planning to use the games as an offering during study halls, as part of their library instruction, and for after-school programming. The other critical element of support that the system provided was introducing this idea to the school superintendents of the region. Focusing on the research and the learning outcomes of the games led to strong support from the school leaders. Our marketing efforts here were so successful that superintendents have asked me to present more information on gaming and our game program at their upcoming retreat.

At the time of this writing, we are just getting started with our school library gaming efforts. Even so, I feel very positive about the potential for the future. My goal for this initiative was to introduce gaming as a new tool for school libraries that supports learning while also promoting the library as an exciting and welcoming destination. Based on the initial response from the librarians who participated, I think that there is a strong commitment in the region to finding ways to make gaming a successful part of library programs. To say that this result was expected all along would be a lie. I was quite worried going into this project that the game library would have a hard time gaining acceptance among both the school administrators and the librarians. This is why we started small with a $500 investment in the first set of games. The reports coming in from librarians who have already begun using the games with their students, however, are very positive. Librarians are asking for more games and more copies of the games we already have.

Overall, I am very pleased with how this has turned out. I feel very strongly that games and gaming are a powerful tool for learning and a great way for school libraries to provide another type of resource to the schools they serve. In this age of high-stakes testing, everything must be focused on instruction, but there are many ways for students to learn. Playing a game like *Numbers League* forces students to use as much math as an addition worksheet, but in an authentic application that also happens to be a heck of a lot of fun. The game *Settlers of Catan* can provide additional support to a lecture on the development of early civilizations, and *Quiddler* is quite obviously an English language arts game. Libraries have always been successful at providing a rich variety of resources to support learning. Games are another way to reach students and provide them with an enriching and entertaining experience. The secret to gaming in school libraries, however, is to always remain focused on enrichment; our goal is student success, and games that align with curriculum objectives and provide rich learning environments are also aligned with that goal we share with the rest of the school.

There are still a number of questions that we have to address. How can we best transport these games around the more than 1,800 square miles of our system? What is the most efficient way to inventory the game pieces? How do we handle the inevitable loss of pieces from games like *Ticket to Ride,* which has hundreds of small, plastic train cars? The most important question right now, however, is one that we are very happy to have to answer. What games do we buy next?

See Appendix A for descriptions of the games purchased and used by Harris in his program.

As Nicholson notes, there is a new world of tabletop games libraries can embrace to meet any number of goals and anticipated outcomes, from improving the reputation of the library with younger patrons to providing games for social interactions between diverse groups. This may be the quickest and easiest way for libraries to integrate a new generation of gaming services since it is based on a familiar model. And yet, the outside world continues to expand the definition of *gaming* in ways that provide completely new models for us.

Talking Points

- Gaming as a whole is not a new service in libraries and has been around for decades. Videogames now suffer from the same stigma in libraries that board games such as chess did decades ago.
- Modern tabletop games have evolved to include even greater degrees of literacy and engaging play, making many of them appropriate for use in libraries.
- There are many modern board games that complement classroom learning activities and engage students in active learning.

BoardGameGeek
http://boardgamegeek.com

Board Games 101 with Scott Nicholson
www.boardgameswithscott.com/?p=5

Board/Card Games (About.com)
http://boardgames.about.com

Notes

1. Virginia A. Walter and Elaine Meyers, *Teens & Libraries: Getting It Right.* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2003), p. 7.
2. Robert Snape, "Betting, Billiards and Smoking: Leisure in Public Libraries." *Leisure Studies* 11 (1992): 187–199.
3. See, for example, James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,* 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (New York: Riverhead, 2005).