

Libraries, Role-Playing and Gaming

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Then I told [Stan Lee] what I thought the secret was.
“Yes!” he shrieked, **and he jumped up onto his chair.**

It is really no secret. The way to succeed as a storyteller hasn't changed...**tell a good story and tell it well** [bold from original] (Shooter, A-89, A-96).

...compared to a comic book, a videogame is really much more exciting, and it makes the person who would be the comic book reader, it makes him or her a participant...you're part of the story, so to me that really has the edge (Lee, 18).

“It's a game that doesn't require anything more than imagination,” one student said. “It's inside everybody. You just have to tap it (Jaffe, 4).”

The first quote is from the inspirational story of Jim Shooter, who at fourteen years of age, decided the publishers of Superman “needed me most,” and sold his first three comic book stories (A-87). Why would such a young person believe he could step into the role of comic book's most coveted job? He explains in depth how he identified with Stan Lee's characters, “studied” and “analyzed” them (A-87). After convincing Lee to hire him, Shooter would later go on to become Marvel Comics' Editor in Chief.

When new mediums emerge, it is often difficult to fully understand the new scope of thought brought to their users. This is in large part due to the fact that the new media needs to be explored for its rules and logic to be developed. It is only in the process of discovery that a sense of its capabilities can be absorbed. In fact, we still do this in ‘old’ forms, in our roles of readers, viewers and writers. Even as traditions coalesce, their rules continue to be reshaped as participants produce and encounter content. Libraries exist in order to encourage this participation and provide access to it.

Marc Prensky uses the terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” to differentiate between the new generations raised with new media and their forebears that have adapted to it becoming part of their life (“Chasing the Dream”). While the analogy is questionable, the general notion is clear. Younger members of our society intuitively

understand the language of technology. Wilson puts it straightforwardly: “teens are learning in a way that is unfamiliar (449).” This raises the question of whether “there might be a set of literacy skills associated with computers and video games that are distinct from the traditional literacy skills required for print media (Greenfield in Gunter, 21). Suoranta and Lehtimaki note that the skills currently being gained are ones “that parents perceive as foreign (70).”

2005 saw the closing of the World Summit on the Information Society, with the adopted agenda declaring “We note with satisfaction the increasing use of ICT by governments to serve citizens and encourage countries that have not yet done so to develop national programmes and strategies for e-Government (*Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*).” This shift in civilian responsibility ensures a demand for information and communication literacy skills. In order to develop these, young people are going to need to be exposed to the necessary tools – and “children use the equipment of the information society to play games (Suoranta and Lehtimaki, 69).”

Arguing that “libraries are in the content business,” Helmrich and Neiburger present gaming as a relevant lead-in to the entirety of the library’s services. Using gaming as a “hook” is an idea echoed by Ott (150). This desire to open the doors is supported by the findings and positions taken by a number of commentators. Forty-four of the forty-eight teens Wilson spoke with at a convention believed they would use the library more often if games were in the collection (449). Accounts of successful gaming programs have been reported in Ann Arbor, MI (Helmrich and Neiburger); North Hunterdon, NJ; Austin, TX (Delneo); Santa Monica, CA (Squire and Steinkuehler); and Bristol, U.K. (“Chasing the Dream”).

While providing games for recreational uses is “an important function...in and of itself,” the hook can be employed to introduce youth to educational ICT materials (Ott, 150). This can apply whether it is a gateway to materials or simply a method of becoming comfortable with the medium. Gaming is seen as learning that “incorporates discovery, analysis, interpretation, and performance as well as physical and mental activity (EDUCAUSE in Corbit, 18). Research indicates “that far from impeding intellectual growth, computer and video games invoked and stimulated certain categories of mental abilities, especially those concerned with the effective processing of information presented in images (Gunter, 28).” Suoranta and Lehtimaki concur, stating “the playing of computer games requires and enhances the capacity to read and interpret rapidly changing images,” an “invaluable skill (70).” They regard gaming as the way children gain “general mastery of computers” (72) and “media competence (69).”

I think that, to a large degree, we have been looking at gaming as having a secret, much like radio, television and comic books posed a similar conundrum to those unfamiliar. Storytelling is at the core of gaming, and this links it to all the other media the library champions. We need to be able to identify who is telling these stories and who is telling them well. But there is also something missing, something extra that we have failed to acknowledge in our original equation. With gaming, storytelling is participatory, meaning that the designers and at least one player create the narrative together.

In order to accomplish this, the player must have some entry point to the game. It is here that we are overestimating technology’s role (Cock, 209). With print we do not look at the pages and text as our identification with the story, but the characters and point

of view. Games, too, are engaged with in this way. We need, however, a way to accommodate and discuss the interactivity that games demand. Fuller and Jenkins point to how the game “character” is usurped by the player: “the character is little more than a cursor that mediates the player’s relationship to the story world (Gunter, 25).”

Attention to the role-playing that is performed parallel to the gaming activity can help us understand the attraction, power and success of gaming stories. Role-playing is typically thought of as just one certain type of game, and certainly this type of game exists and still maintains a fair amount of support. Price, who runs sessions of the prototypical role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, at a library in Glendale, AZ, describes the game as “essentially a joint storytelling session with rules (454).” Wilson also champions role-playing, along with miniature, card and board games. But why role-playing, especially given it is rated lowest amongst forms of games in a survey by Suoranta and Lehtimaki (71)?

This is because role-playing has crept into all forms of games. It emerged from miniature games (Mackay), but has played a part in the simplest of games since players first started gaming. It is possible to look at any position a player takes as a role - the “character becomes the imaginary point of contact between the player and the fictional world (Mackay, 28).” That it is a coincidence this action grew important enough to develop its own genre, in a century that also unleashed method acting, new journalism, and participant observation, is unlikely. Role-playing behaviour is also a valuable new skill set. Cultivation and promotion of this activity is necessary for its own sake, but will be entangled with the adoption of gaming as a whole.

Role-playing is revealed by the interaction between the player and the props of his or her environment, be it dice, video or a child's cardboard box. The building of these worlds and the interaction with and discovery of their rules is the learning activity in gaming. Mackay argues role-playing games characteristically involve the creation of a "shared world, in which a setting transcends any one particular author" or any particular medium (29). These can be thought of as the "tie-ins" Wilson makes note of (448), or as put by Stan Lee: "the comic books help the games, the games help the comic books, the movies help the games and the comic books, the comic books help the movies (18)." These commercial worlds are examples of the role-playing dynamic taken into a mass media dynamic, where even control over 'official' and unofficial storylines become blurred, as characters themselves vary as tailored to target age and medium user groups.

However, this is not the only way role-playing worlds are generated. All that is necessary is that flexibility allow for some imprint to be made, or exploited, into the game universe. Squire and Steinkuehler give the example of Apolyton University, an online space dedicated to providing courses in order to teach skills to new players of *Civilization* (38-39). "Game cultures feature participation in a collective intelligence, blur the distinction between the production and consumption of information, emphasize expertise rather than status, and promote international and cross-cultural media and communities (Squire and Steinkuehler, 38).

To participate in the game culture, one must act and make decisions. This experiential aspect of gaming is fused with role-playing because it attributes responsibility to the gamer for the game to work. Beginning role-players were frequently encouraged to pick and choose which rules they wished to use; the importance was on

making the game work for the players and not having the game bog down because of rigidity. A 1982 issue of *Popular Computing* ran a column called “Dragonsmoke” that advocated that this mindset made role-playing games perfect for preparing children to use computers. In turn, gaming culture would appear to have influenced the newest, ‘3.5’ version of *Dungeons and Dragons* rules, an “open-source D20 system (Wilson, 447).”

Gaming develops the critical ability to make decisions for oneself, both for immediate gain and in view of long-term strategies. Delneo observes “gamers typically have a focused approach to playing and solve problems through trial and error (34).” Complexity in gaming is growing as more and more gamers gravitate toward “non-zero sum games...in which a victory for one side does not necessarily preclude victory or success for the other side (Mackay, 14).” Role-playing exercises develop “creative and imaginative skills...that allow for the generation of several novel and distinct alternatives which might be applied in a given situation” and promote “a capacity for divergent thinking (Wheatley, 88).” One U.S. study found females with “more playing experience tended also to be more achievement motivated (Gibb in Gunter, 44).”

The library serves to provide tools to allow for such an empowered citizenry. We must be expected to draw on the newest ideas if we are going to be able to fulfill our duty. Gaming already constitutes a fundamental activity in our patrons’ lives, and it is unlikely this will do anything but grow. Patrons that cannot afford to participate in gaming experiences will increasingly lose out as information, communication and decision-making skills becoming increasingly codified by those who have the means to use them at will.

The documentary *Uber Goober* does a remarkable job of illustrating how gamers have been marginalized and made scapegoats. Yet the social learning activity they have crafted has been legitimized by its widespread adoption in various fields. The utility of games to bridge social gaps was the reason for the invention of the earliest video games, as scientists tinkered with their mainframe computers in order to provide stimulating entertainment for annual open house visitors at MIT and a Long Island nuclear reactor research facility (Burnham). Both Barack and *The Economist* point to a book, *Got Game*, whose authors' are proponents of using gaming as an application to improve business practices. A recent *Toronto Star* series reports on a new program training at-risk youth in role-playing techniques so they can in turn train social workers (Fiorito). Finally, *Medical Education* reports on the success of emergency training using a patient simulator, a nurse and a professional actor portraying a relative (Weller *et al*), and on the importance of debriefing and de-roling when using experience based training (Stafford).

Introducing and gaming in libraries can help to provide a social context that has been lacking beyond the sociability of the games themselves. Debriefing and de-roling in the library setting could be achieved for patrons by expanding the choices and varieties of games and gaming roles to play. Placing gaming as one medium in the spectrum of storytelling options will also serve to develop the new critical literacy that demands one know how to insert oneself into the story. A study by Carr showed that exposure to gaming resulted in increased competencies that allowed previously non-gamers to access and select the roles they wished to explore. As gamers explore their roles as readers, viewers, and computer users, they will inevitably compare and reflect on their gaming choices and preferences. Closing off patrons to gaming will only ensure they have less

games – and roles – to choose from. For many this is a barrier they already face; is it not the library's job to try and alleviate such barriers?

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