



## A Literature Review of How Videogames Are Assessed in Library and Information Science and Beyond



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper the author explores how videogames and gaming are assessed in Library and Information Science (LIS) and in other fields. The author concludes with a discussion of some potential future directions for assessment practices of videogames and gaming in LIS.

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### INTRODUCTION

Since approximately 2008 gaming services in all types of libraries have seen increases. Jenny Levine suggested that 2008 was the tipping point in history when offering games became “just like any other library service” (Levine, 2008). While the introduction of gaming services has proliferated, much of the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature related to games has focused on developing and providing the best gaming experience (Mayer & Harris, 2010; Nicholson, 2010). This focus is appropriate and essential in this new era of games for libraries. If gaming is going to continue to grow, however, implementation must be accompanied with equal attention devoted to assessment and measurement in order to understand the impact games are having in library spaces. This literature review analyzes and critiques current assessment practices in LIS as related to videogames and gaming. Additionally this paper explores how videogames and gaming are assessed in other fields. The author concludes with a summary of some assessment practices and suggestions of how to incorporate them more broadly into LIS contexts.

#### WHAT IS GAMING?

Gaming is generally used to describe the act of playing videogames. However, in the context of the library, gaming can mean so much more. Maroney (2001) defined games as “a form of play with goals and structure.” This broad definition includes card games, board games,

role playing, puzzles, sports, traditional console based videogames, computer games, games for mobile devices, and even some simulations. Visit any public library and you will likely find many of the aforementioned games with the exception of outdoor sports games. For the purpose of this paper, “games” refer to these broader contexts of play being used to build community and foster interaction of people with the library. In addition to people, this influx of games into various library spaces also brings with it the need for assessment in order to expand and improve gaming services.

#### ASSESS WHAT?

The online Merriam Webster Dictionary defines assessment as the act of making a judgment about something or the act of assessing something (assessment, 2014). Assessment is generally greatly emphasized in education and is associated with testing and other measures taken to help determine where students are in their learning. In education, assessment is generally categorized as “formative,” those assessments taken while the learning is ongoing in an effort to make improvements to teaching, and “summative,” those assessments taken toward the end of units in an effort to see what information students retained. The general purpose of educational assessment is understood to be of the learning that takes place in educational settings. But what should be assessed for videogames and gaming used in libraries?

Gee (2003) has argued persuasively that videogames require literacy to play and require intense concentration as well as thinking for mastery. This notion of literacy shared by Gee and others has arguably given rise to a prolific use of games in education and other settings. More recently Gee and Shaffer (2010) have argued for games to be

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tied to specific communities of practice, with each experience designed both to teach the players real world skills, and to provide multifaceted contexts of working inside a community. These games are referred to as epistemic games because each community has a specific epistemology, or similar knowledge, concepts and values to work from. Additionally [Shaffer and Gee \(2012\)](#) have suggested that games should be used as assessment tools to replace current standardized assessment tools used in education. Since this literature and other works like it define the context for adopting videogames and gaming in LIS environments, it is these new contexts for exploring how we learn from games that need to be assessed. The next section explores this question of how videogames and gaming are assessed in LIS.

### WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO ASSESS GAMING IN LIBRARIES?

A variety of literature in LIS has been published since 2007, with a primary emphasis on videogames and gaming in the library. These resources provide an overview of why videogames are appropriate for libraries and also the criteria recommended for assessment. After a review of the literature, four broad perspectives of assessing videogames and gaming emerged: program-centric, event-centric, game-centric and player-centric.

In her book, *Game on! Gaming at the library*, [Gallaway \(2009\)](#) provides example surveys to evaluate if game programs are successful and to collect feedback on how to improve future services. In one example assessment librarians are given a guide to perform a self-assessment of a game program after it has taken place ([Gallaway, 2009, p. 143](#)). Some examples of the program centered information collected by Gallaway's instrument are the lessons learned from hosting the event, budget information, and the information on any partners for the creation of the event. Review of Gallaway's survey instrument highlights the fact that game programs can be considered one-time "events" or they can be considered more broadly as the collection of gaming events, i.e. a sustained program designed to bring in patrons to play games over longer periods. This distinction between program and event could give rise to two distinct assessment perspectives: program-centric and event-centric. Data such as the data collected by some of the questions in Gallaway's survey instrument create an opportunity to assess whether game program objectives are being met. Additionally they allow administrators of the program to compare and contrast results over time. Program-centric assessment can be done to evaluate game programs against the criteria set forth by individual libraries, governing boards and other library stakeholders. In general programmatic assessments will judge programs to determine if the program is meeting the goals it set out to meet and also determine if the mission of the library is being fulfilled. While Gallaway's survey instrument has some questions addressing program-centric assessment, the majority of it emphasizes recording what took place at a specific event. In addition to addressing recording budgetary expenditures and collecting lessons learned data, Gallaway could emphasize higher level assessments and program-centric information such as: what does the program do to meet the library's literacy mission; and how is the program using the money from grants or donations to achieve those related objectives [Nicholson \(2010\)](#), on the other hand, provides key insights on developing instruments to assess gaming at the program level, Nicholson offers several types of program level data libraries may be interested in collecting: information on the underserved population (p. 193), information on what patrons do between programming, what the library can do to better meet patron needs (p. 194) and how well the library is functioning as a community hub (p. 194).

As mentioned earlier, [Gallaway's \(2009\)](#) survey instrument also highlights "event-centric" perspectives of assessment. This type of assessment collects data on the number of people attending, the games people played, and any other specific happenings that may need to be highlighted. Event-centric data can be collected in a variety of ways. Whereas Gallaway uses surveys, [Neiburger \(2007\)](#) suggests

that focus groups can be used as advisory boards in an effort to tailor gaming services to one of the more underserved audiences of the library, teens (p. 161). Nicholson also takes an event-centric viewpoint when he provides example questions, but he suggests to measure participant satisfaction (p. 197). Both works offer several useful chapters on the logistics of setting up gaming events and largely place emphasis on learning what happens at an event, what games should be included, and the formats of game play for the event. Generally this "event-centric" view of assessment emphasizes evaluation to improve event logistics and pinpoint problems for a specific event.

In this type of assessment a librarian might assess a one day gaming tournament to collect data on the number of people attending, how the event might be improved, or ask participants for feedback on the videogames they played. Assessment focused on events can emphasize improving future events, satisfaction of attendants, and the likelihood attendants may attend future offerings. Event assessment can collect data to support future administrative decisions related to game programs and support improved logistics.

A third way to assess gaming services is by emphasizing the game itself. These types of assessment are "game-centric" because they highlight the skills, goals and objectives the games are meant to impart. "Game-centric" assessments are important from an administrative standpoint because these types of assessments can be used to determine the games to include in the library collection and can be informed by the program-centric assessments of the library mission. [Gallaway \(2009\)](#) provides two instruments to evaluate games, a collection survey and a videogame evaluation checklist (p. 144–145). While these instruments are important for data collection they relate primarily to the entertainment goals of public libraries. Alternatively, [Mayer and Harris \(2010\)](#) take a game-centric approach to assessment when they align learning from board games according to two different standards: the 21st century learner standards and the state and national curriculum standards for the United States. For Mayer and Harris the question of assessment comes down to: "is it [a game] adding value to the students' understanding of certain aspects of the topic that cannot be addressed otherwise" (p. 77–78)? Here Mayer and Harris discuss the criteria that must be met before a game is included in a school library collection, so that once a game is included it can help the library achieve its mission. There are also numerous examples of this approach from the academic library setting.

[Beck, Callison, Fudrow, and Hood \(2008\)](#) report on how they incorporated the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) literacy standards into their literacy instruction platform, Library Arcade. In the Library Arcade players can work on matching students with the right resources in one mini-game or organize books according to the Library of Congress Classification System in another mini-game.

In another example of game-centric assessment [Markey, Leeder, and St. Jean \(2011\)](#) used ACRL standards as the basis for their game BiblioBouts. According to the authors, "BiblioBouts is an online tournament made up of a series of mini-games or bouts, each of which introduces students to a specific subset of information literacy skills within the overall research process" (p. 49). In each mini-game students use the citation tool Zotero to organize citations and sources for research. In some cases students rate other students' resources, this is known as the tagging and rating bout. In other cases students work on specific research questions and choose the best resources, this is known as the best bibliography bout. In the donor bout, students look in library and Web databases, save resources, and contribute them to the game. These tasks stress information literacy tasks and essentially turn the research process into a game. There are many other examples of academic libraries using videogames and gaming for information literacy instruction. For a more comprehensive review of this topic refer to [Smale \(2011\)](#). The cases presented here demonstrate that aligning games with information literacy standards is one way of conducting game-centric assessment.

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