

Playing at professional development?

Ellen Forsyth
Consultant, Public Library Services
State Library of New South Wales
eforsyth@sl.nsw.gov.au

Abstract

The State Library of New South Wales runs a professional development program in World of Warcraft for public library staff who are interested in games and their use in libraries. The discussions include use of online games. Board and video games have also been discussed in these sessions. Speakers include public library staff from Australia and the USA, as well as academics and other educators who are using or exploring the use of games. There has even been an online reading group discussion as part of one of these sessions.

Why games?

Games can help people learn and connect. Museums are effective in using games to help people explore their collections and the stories they can tell. The Powerhouse Museum (2011) developed the game *China heart* to showcase collection items for Chinese New Year in 2011. The Science Museum in London (2011) has an extensive range of online and in-museum games to help people learn about science. Ann Arbor District Library (2011) is doing very impressive things with games, including a summer game instead of a summer reading program; however, this is the exception. Much of the library use of games is program- or event-based, and this is still really valuable.

I explore ideas about the use of games for home library service readers (Forsyth 2009), for readers' advisory work (Forsyth 2010), reference and local studies (Forsyth 2011).

The quote below, from a man in his twenties, who reads and plays games, is from a survey I did to explore the appeal of both reading and playing games (Forsyth 2010).

I guess a small part of me reads and plays fantasy games for escapism. Whether they are honest with you or not, most readers of the genre are attracted by the vivid worlds and unique experiences provided in fantasy writing and I think that this is intensified in Role Playing Games of the fantasy genre, as they allow one an interactive experience in a whole new world, effectively casting themselves in new roles they may never get a chance to play in real life.

For me, escapism is only a small part of a bigger picture however. Fantasy for me provides an excellent canvas for expressing ones imagination and creativity, more so than other genres in my opinion. As a reader, each new series, each new book or short story is unique and bold, dripping with colour and life and although it can be said for all literature, it is especially true that each work of fantasy fiction is strongly unique in ways uncapturable in other genres.

I feel this aspect of fantasy is intensified with RPG's, as they not only give a storyteller the tools to create their own worlds but they make it a much more intense experience for those who choose to join that world. Where in a series such as Lord of the Rings, we all held our breath as characters bought an epic storyline to life, in a game of the same nature, we play those same stylised heroic characters and the fate of the world and it's inhabitants, no more or less real than in a traditional piece of literature, is in our hands.

Investigating the professional development possibilities of games is an extension of these ideas of interactivity, experience and engagement.

Who plays games?

Games are played by people of all ages, education levels and social groups. It is hard to obtain complete statistics across all kinds of games, but the following statistics provide representative data.

- As of 29 August 2011 there had been 87.7 million Wii, 55.5 million x-box 360, 52.2 million PS3, 148 million Nintendo DS and 69.3 million PSP units or consoles sold worldwide (VGChartz network 2011)
- *Games continue to be the most popular app category, and according to Nielsen research, 93 percent of app downloaders - those who have downloaded an app within the past 30 days - are willing to pay for the games they play. In contrast, only 76 percent of downloaders are willing to pay for news apps (Play before work 2011)*

Use of Second Life and games for professional development

Second Life (Second Life 2011), an online world, has been extensively explored by libraries and museums as a way of providing information and access to the expertise of professional staff from wherever the client is. Second Life was the location chosen by the American Library Association for a one-day conference in March 2008 that was called *Virtual worlds: libraries, education and museums* (Peter 2008) This was followed by a two-day conference of the same name in 2009 (Riddle 2009). The presentations used a mix of speech and typed text depending on the technology the presenter was most familiar with or could get to work. These conferences were an interesting way to explore the possibilities within Second Life, trying out ideas by actually doing them. Similar ideas have also been explored in *The future is now: libraries and museums in virtual worlds* (The future is now 2010) conference held in Second Life in 2010.

There has been limited use of games as an actual environment for providing professional development for library workers. Other professions have been using online games as a way of connecting with other researchers, in areas like sociology (Digital culture, play, and identity 2008) and social science (Bainbridge 2010). The Libraries and Librarians of Aerie Peak Guild (Libraries and librarians of Aerie Peak 2011) is a guild in World of Warcraft that focuses on the fun of play, and it is about being in a guild with people who work in the same industry. It seemed timely to explore online games as a forum for professional development.

Why use a game?

The idea of using a game for professional development was explored after the author had undertaken an online course in games in libraries from San Jose State University in 2009 (LIBR 287-13). The course was taught online using orthodox tools like ANGEL, an online learning management system; however, the student meetings took place in Second Life and various games. After the experience of having a discussion in Lord of the Rings Online (Lord of the Rings Online 2011) and students killing wolves to protect each other during this discussion, it seemed that this idea of professional development in games could be further explored. Students were able to have very vigorous, interactive discussions, and learn about ideas about games from within games. It demonstrated that the actual environment could enhance the

discussion, providing a useful online learning tool for people who could not otherwise be in the one physical space.

r u game?

In late 2010, the State Library of New South Wales launched an online professional development program for public library staff interested in how games can be used in their libraries. This program takes place in World of Warcraft (World of Warcraft 2011), which is a massively multiple online game. The term massively multiple (or massively multiplayer) online game simply means that it is a really, really big game with lots of people playing and interacting online.

The program was developed in response to positive feedback for a seminar, organised in June 2010, on libraries and games, which also took place in World of Warcraft. While this seminar was a first for libraries, there had been a previous scientific conference held in World of Warcraft (Bohannon 2008, Online worlds 2009, Convergence of the real and the virtual 2009). A deliberate decision was made to have a discussion in an online game about games, as a way of informing public library staff about the possibilities. The in-game discussions about games are not limited to the use of online games, as board, card, video and other games have also been discussed in these sessions. Nor is participation limited to public library staff. The participants include public, state and academic library staff, library consultants, web developers, IT staff and academics. The mix varies each time based on the speaker.

The series, known as *r u game* (but using the hashtag #rugame for purposes of tweeting), uses game-based discussions to learn about games, and to gain access to speakers who are otherwise inaccessible because of distance from participants and the cost of bringing these presenters to Australia. Speakers have included public and university library staff from Australia and the USA as well as academics and other educators who are using or exploring the use of games. There has even been an online reading group discussion as part of one of these sessions.

Transcripts of all the sessions are available for broader access from a wiki (Games and libraries wiki 2011) and they are being extensively consulted.

Session description

World of Warcraft is a subscription game, costing US\$14.99 per month. Some of the participants subscribe to the game to participate in the talks; other participants are regular players of World of Warcraft. Some of the participants do not play, but are watching while one of their library colleagues drives the toon. Toon is the term used to describe the in-game representation of the participant, and is the preferred term for World of Warcraft.

World of Warcraft is a fantasy world with complex lore and history. There are monsters, with plants and moths even becoming dangerous. There are many races of toon, divided into two factions, Alliance and Horde. Both the Horde and Alliance have several races. For example the Alliance has human, gnome, night elf, dwarf, worgen, draenai (Races: World of Warcraft 2011) and each of these can have a different class (Classes: World of Warcraft 2011) or skills base (not all classes are

available for all races) for example mage, priest, warrior, druid, or paladin. Each race has particular strengths; for example, gnomes are really intelligent. .

World of Warcraft is divided into many servers as there are over eleven million subscribers to this game. Each server replicates the same world, to reduce overcrowding in the game. The games and libraries talks take place in the Saurfang (Oceania) realm. Alliance toons are used. The toons have to be one faction or the other, and based on one server.

The seminar that was held in June 2010 took place in both Stormwind and Ironforge Libraries, which allowed new players to see both human and dwarf strongholds. This involved travel and navigation, which was very challenging for some of the new participants, and slowed down the discussion, as it was awkward to move toons and type at the same time.

Most of the cities, and many of the towns and settlements in World of Warcraft, have libraries (Libraries 2011). They are a necessary part of the world, as they contain much of the lore of the world. The librarians are also key characters in many quests and interactions within the game. Some of the librarians are armed and actively fight in the battle between Horde and Alliance; others provide complex quests.

The ongoing talks take place in Ironforge Library. They take place in a game as a way of exploring the constraints and possibilities of an online games environment for multisite discussions, programs or events.

Communication is not dependent on being in the one online space together other than being on the one server and all the participants' toons being either Alliance or Horde. People tend to get their toons to one location, so they can interact with one another, somewhat like being in a face-to-face seminar. It is only a little bit like being in a face-to-face seminar, as some of the participants are shapeshifting; for example, a worgan druid that not only shifts between worgan (wolf like) and human forms, but also into the tree form of the druid. Various animals/pets also create a different look and sound as well, and people might be asked to signal their agreement with an idea by having their toon dance.

Ironforge Library was selected as a location as it is a low-traffic area at the time of day of the talks, and it is easy for new people to find. Quite a few buildings have useful rooms to meet in, but they are not so easy to find, and outdoor spaces often have dangerous wildlife, which could be distracting or dangerous for some of the toons. The idea of meeting in a library in a game to talk about libraries and games also has appeal. The meetings have to take place in a location that all toons can access. Parts of the game are not accessible to low level toons or are extremely dangerous for them.

Guild chat is used during the talks. This is an instant messaging channel specific to each guild. All the participants have to belong to the one guild; in this case, the *Where is the library guild*, to be able to communicate. Once the toon is logged on, it is possible to read and participate in all the discussions that take place on the guild chat instant messaging channel.

The presentations take place with the speakers typing their talk into the instant messaging screen. The talks tend to be highly interactive, with many questions coming through the discussion. This interactivity can be seen from looking at the transcripts (Edited transcripts 2011).

It is difficult to describe these sessions so that people unfamiliar with online games can visualise them. When participating in the sessions a lot of concentration is required because of the ideas being discussed rather than because of the format. The novels *For the win*, by Cory Doctorow (2010), *Mogworld* by Yahtzee Crowshaw (2010), *Reamde* by Neal Stephenson (2011) and *Ready player one* by Ernest Cline (2011) all provide excellent descriptions of the experience of playing in online games. There are also some evocative descriptions of online play in *Fun Inc* by Tom Chatfield (2010)

Issues about using a game for professional development

Participants and speakers were surveyed to find out more about their experiences of this format of professional development.

Speaker viewpoints

All of the speakers were experienced at playing games. Not all of the speakers had played World of Warcraft prior to their presentations.

The presenters were asked to comment on their experience of presenting via instant messaging.

Their comments included:

- *It was unique! I'm glad I'm a fast accurate typist but my desire not to make typos was aggravating.*
- *It was the first time I did a presentation that way, so it was a bit awkward at first. However, after the first few minutes, I thought it went well. It felt a lot like chatting with friends in the game.*
- *It was great. The setup in WoW was so easy to use and I found it quite nice to follow*
- *Having used text chats as a teacher in college, I was familiar with the many difficulties involved in having conversations in this medium; however, I was pleasantly surprised with how easily the conversation moved and how everyone stayed on topic and kept up with the conversation. The conversation did not splinter as text chats so often do.*
- *easy - I'm a quick typist, and fast reader :) and I just kept focused.*
- *I think the method worked really well. It made the point that it is possible to have this kind of professional development in a game and gave the opportunity for this information to be available. It is highly interactive as it is very easy for people to ask questions. It was great the way that so many questions could be asked.*

While the instant messaging presentation method worked well for most presenters, as overall their comments were very positive, it did not work well for all of them. Some of them found it a stressful experience, while for others it was obviously a lot of fun. Most of them mentioned the ease of using the instant messaging method of

communication, while one or two felt that it took a little while to be comfortable in an environment with overlapping channels of instant messaging being used.

Presenters were asked to comment on what could have provided a better experience, however their comments focused around what they actually enjoyed about the experience, rather than how it could be improved. Their comments, some of which are included below, highlight the positive nature of the discussions, and the high degree of interactivity:

- *The ability to reach across time and space! Seriously, the international aspect led to questions I wouldn't have considered otherwise, and it genuinely felt global despite being in a whole different "world." I am deeply comfortable in that world, which led to less presenter-butterflies than I might've otherwise experienced.*
- *This format adds a layer of presence to the meeting. The unusual format also lightens the mood of the discussion. That's a plus to me.*
- *I liked the emote ability being used and I liked being able to visually see the participant avatars. The only thing that might have helped a bit would be pre-sent questions. The participants could have sent a couple questions beforehand that might have helped guide the original introduction.*
- *I dug it. The only thing I worry about is how some people not familiar to WoW and gaming in general may be turned off. Perhaps somehow having the presentation in WoW and also streaming it somewhere else so that others could watch.*
- *I enjoyed the visual aspects of the format; seeing the avatars and being in the 3-D space made it more fun. I'm not even sure why it was more fun specifically.*
- *It's a cool and fun idea. I felt welcomed by the guild and it was interesting the way the various chat tools and emotes were used by the attendees.*
- *I liked all the questions which could be asked, and that it was very easy to clarify any points. It is also fun presenting in an environment where everyone is present in the form of toons. This seems to change the interactions and in a way make it easier for people to ask questions.*

The speakers were asked about how they found the interaction with the participants. The comments about this focused on the high degree of interactivity:

- *They asked great questions and were very interactive. The ones I spoke with seemed comfortable in the medium.*
- *The participants at the meeting I attended were all very informed and thoughtful. It was a great exchange of ideas.*
- *was so glad they wanted to talk too!*
- *It was easy to engage with the attendees and I liked very much that the chat format lowered the inhibition against attendees jumping into discussion during a presentation, since it's much better suited to discussion.*
- *It was interactive. People were asking questions, they were interacting with each other, the discussions were great to see.*

However, the interactivity did make it more complicated for the presenters

- *I thought it was a good discussion. The only issue was trying to finish an answer when there were other questions coming forward. So it was a bit of a challenge to go back and answer all the questions.*

For eight out of the ten speakers it was an effective format for the information they were seeking to convey.

They were asked for other comments they had about this method of professional development. While most of the comments were positive a couple were not, and this would line up with the earlier comments about the effectiveness of this kind of environment:

- *Using WoW is a gimmick ... (with a layer of gaming paint).*
- *I think the discussion was great and very well moderated. It just seems that WOW is ultimately a poorly-suited and low-interest venue for talks like this... I had a blast doing this but it ultimately seems like the in-world element ultimately just limits the audience and the impact.*
- *This is a great example of how professional learning communities are breaking traditional (and artificial) boundaries for learning. I love it.*
- *I think it is a great way for people to meet and do the seminars...it enables a higher degree and diversity of participation than face to face and is apt given the content.*
- *it's a brilliant idea and I was pleased to participate.*
- *I think this is a great format and it is brilliant to see that this series is continuing.*

For most of the presenters, the environment did enhance the discussion, including the ability for people in diverse locations to participate.

Participant viewpoints

Amongst the participants, there was a higher percentage of people who had little game-playing experience, but there were also very experienced players participating. The participants who completed the survey are from USA, England and Australia. They are a mix of library (various sectors), IT, and academic staff with ages ranging from 20s to 50s.

Participants were asked what they hoped to learn from these discussions. Comments about this included:

- *New ways of using the game in the classroom and new ways of expanding my knowledge and skill base*
- *To hear discussions "live" from experts and other noted figures in games and libraries/education. "Social presence" in a virtual world I am comfortable with ... made it feel like a relaxed workshop among those with shared interests.*
- *I thought the idea was really innovative and I was really interested to see how it would be presented and what ideas would be put forward.*
- *To understand why games are so popular, how they are being used in education and libraries, to understand how the 'gamification' trend is influencing business and society.*

Other comments highlighted a general interest in finding more about how libraries can use games, the wish to expand library audiences, how games can be used in learning, using games and media to interact with library clients, and how effective programs run in games environments could be.

They were also asked about what they had learned. It was not always a positive outcome: one participant thought that the platform was too open to passing people.

Other people had better experiences:

- *Lessons for the classroom and new ways to create in-game content to up my level of play*
- *Eli's discussion of games and SRP look especially enthralling, but I have learned at least some new tidbits from every event I attended. [This refers to Eli Neiburger's (2011) presentation about the summer game program at Ann Arbor District Library]*
- *It was interesting to see how online gaming could be used as a medium for an application of learning. It was interesting to see how different people used the same media in different ways. Staffing and expenditure are always relevant to any activity run by libraries, so it was useful to see how these obstacles were overcome.*
- *About the application of games (eg. WOW in Schools), outcomes from game based programming, specific applications of games in library environments (eg. play.aadl.org), how an online environment works.*
- *I came away from the first discussion with a lot of ideas for implementing computer gaming programs in a public library setting.*
- *You can tap into an instant micro world of knowledge and experience from world leading experts.*
- *Heard about some really fabulous projects thus far - mostly learning how far higher ed really has to go before we can do the same.*
- *there are a number of ways to incorporate games into library events; some are more practical than others, however the learnings can be applied to table-top games as well, and both mediums can be used in a range of ways*
- *online games have been successfully implemented into educational/learning programs in various settings*

The participants were asked about their experience of interacting with each other, and with the presenters. There are a few comments that highlight that this is not a useful method of participation for everyone; for example:

- *Yes, I found the discussion useful, though I think the format of meeting in-game benefits those who don't play more than those who do.*

Others have found the interactions useful:

- *VERY useful and very professional...everyone was so knowledgeable*
- *People were respectful of the need to be considerate of others asking questions at the same time as them. It was entertaining to watch how people used the emote system to interact without interrupting -- made it feel more like something "in person."*

- *I enjoyed the discussions very much and found them very useful. The idea of holding the seminar in a fantasy setting made it new and exciting.*
- *My favourite moment was when a speaker asked everyone who agreed with a statement to dance!*

There was an identical breakdown to the speakers with the question asking about the effectiveness of the online format: 80% of respondents liked it.

They were also asked about their use of the transcripts to help explore the use of the transcripts (as well as by using Google analytics). Not everyone who participates in the talks uses the transcripts. Others find them useful for catching up on talks that they were not able to participate in.

Comments about them include:

- *They are easy to access and very informative. They allowed me to share content with friends who were unable to attend.*
- *I like having them.... They lack the immediacy and liveliness of the event, but they allowed me to read about the material presented on the occasions I could not attend in person.*
- *I find myself referring to the transcripts fairly often, particularly as an information source for other library workers.*
- *Transcripts are great because they a) provide a text I can reference, and b) let me fill in bits of the conversation I might have missed.*
- *1) I've disseminated the link to the #rugame wiki whom I knew were interested; some reacted favorably, while others thought the topic was beyond our immediate objectives 2) I've used the transcripts to glean contact info of speakers, info for further resources*

The participants were also asked for any additional comments about the format, content or method of discussion.

The comments remained consistent with a couple of very negative ones, where people obviously had not had a good experience in the discussions:

- *it helps to have some prior experience with the game and peripheral media (VOIP etc) before the conference so you can fully participate*
- *A closed gaming system would have been more useful. It was a bit like having a meeting in the middle of a soccer pitch in the middle of a game.*

Issues for new players/participants were also raised:

- *I wish it were a little easier for complete noobs to participate for the first time*

Others had helpful suggestions for future sessions:

- *While the talks seem long, they don't seem long enough. Time passes quickly at the events, and I'm always a little surprised that they're over.*
- *I thought this was a brilliant idea and do hope that there will be more of the same. I think this is a useful format to use to make ideas more accessible to a wide range of audiences of all age groups.*
- *I did enjoy the experience of using Warcraft to facilitate a presentation. It's a much more fun way to approach what is traditionally done in web*

conferences. Among other things you get a much better sense of group presence when we're all in the same space together, and in an environment that's not nearly as dull as a standard online presentation. As I said though, I definitely enjoy the experience and will continue to attend the talks :)

Some of these comments highlight the option for introductory sessions to be provided for library staff, to introduce them to massively multiple online games. Ideas are being explored about practical ways this could be done. Collaborations with library workers in other states would help this, as local training could be provided. There are still issues for some library staff about being involved in a game during work time, so some participants are participating in their own time. For others it is work time, and their participation also takes place in the workplace.

Google analytics of use of the games and libraries wiki

The Games and libraries wiki was set up with Google analytics to explore its use. For the 12 months of use prior to September 2011, the event page (2011) has almost one quarter of the site use, with 22.7% of the page views. The transcripts of the talks (2011) account for almost all the other wiki use, with the other pages being little viewed. The use of the wiki is fairly consistent, with about 500 page views per month and just under 250 separate visits per month. Use is predominantly from Australia followed by the USA and Canada.

A wiki was used, as it would allow a range of people to add content, rather than being restricted to people from one organisation. It also allowed people to upload their own photographs and screenshots to be shared with others.

Coverage of r u game in social media

This series of talks and the seminar have received some coverage in social media, mainly from participants. This may reflect on the nature of the participants as much as it reflects on the content of the presentations.

Liz Danforth was the first speaker in the seminar in June 2010, and she has been proactive in writing about the series of talks, also participating in the discussions within the game as well. Her first post about the library talks in World of Warcraft was to promote the seminar held in June 2010, and she addressed the content and the time zone issues in her post *A different library conference* (Danforth June 2010).

Liz Danforth has followed this post with others including information about the talks such as *R U Game?* (September 2010), *Save the date r u game* (January 2011), *Gallaway, Robbins, Sheehy and Gillespie at RU Game* (March 2011), *Updates* (May 2011), *Eli Neuberger and summer games* (September June 2011).

Sarah Thorneycroft, another participant in the talks, used them as an example in a recent blog post about *The Dyson model of innovation* (2011) The talks have also received coverage on the Lyons New Media blog (2011). This is not an exhaustive list of blog coverage, but it shows an interesting range of content.

Justin Hoenke, also a presenter in the games and libraries series, spoke positively about the experience as part of his episode of *This week in libraries* (TWIL 2011); it was also mentioned as part of my discussion on the same program (TWIL 2011).

There is a hashtag, #rugame, for these talks, and use of it is being tracked through summaizr (2011). This hashtag is being used to track social media and other web-based discussion of these talks.

Learning about games

There are numerous resources to help library workers learn more about games. Scott Nicholson, author of *Everyone plays at the library* (2010), has a series of videos about using games in your library (2009). Sophie McDonald's presentation from the mlibraries conference in 2010, *There's a librarian in my pocket: mobile information literacy at UTS Library*, includes references to games (McDonald 2011). There are also numerous blogs and twitter streams to provide relevant information in this area.

Other examples of games for education

WoW in schools (2011) provides a way of learning for high school students who are underperforming. Through a structured use of World of Warcraft, students learn mathematics, writing and communication. Mathematics is learned because the game environment has an active economy that you need to participate in, writing is both in-game and in out-of-game projects, communication is learned because of the amount of collaboration required within the game and for the collaboration to be successful there needs to be effective communication. You can find out more by reading Lucas Gillespie's presentation (Lucas Gillespie transcript 2011) in World of Warcraft.

Training is also being provided to teachers (Gillespie 2011) about how they can build on the WoW in schools work already being done. Resources are made available for them to share as well, such as WoW in schools a hero's journey (2011), which has been published online using a Creative Commons share alike license. Information is also being shared through the Games4Learning wiki (2011)

Adult students are learning through games as well. In *Reflections on Play, Pedagogy, and World of Warcraft* Landon K. Pirius and Gill Creel (Pirius and Creel 2010) provide a student and teacher perspective on the use of World of Warcraft as an environment to learn about ideas to do with culture and identity. They discussed the student and the teacher experience (Pirius and Creel 2011).

Future possibilities

The series of talks running in World of Warcraft is a way to expand the discussion about games, education and libraries. I will explore an expanded use of games for professional development, leading to their increased use as tools for learning. Games for professional development are critical: through experiencing the game and while gaining professional development, ideas are triggered, and possibilities can start to be examined. The space influences thinking, reinvigorating people to explore how games can be used in their library.

I would like to develop a series of structured training sessions to introduce new players and new library workers to the online games environment. This needs to be balanced around many issues, recognising that it is a difficult area for work places to

address. Planning for it, and the sessions, may need to take place out of work time, necessitating a substantial commitment from participants.

I am exploring more possibilities for games in libraries. I am uncomfortable with the term *gamification*, but instead would like to see games used for resource discovery, connecting people with their interests and with other people to share them with (like an extended reads/games/film and television advisory). There is also a place for games to help people explore the history of their community or of an idea.

Continued talks in World of Warcraft depend on speakers being willing to participate, and in people wanting to come along and interact with them. I do not know how long this series will continue, but the evaluation will help in the planning. Based on feedback and discussions thus far, the outlook remains positive.

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