

Stacks of fun: games, community, libraries, technology

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Abstract

Games and libraries are a natural fit. Games are also a form of culture that has been around as long as there has been culture, but has largely been neglected by libraries until recently. The paper includes findings from an August 2011 research trip to the US, where the author spoke to libraries, the games industry, and the public who love them about how all three overlap and interact. It also discusses challenges and opportunities for libraries in recognising the growing public demand for games, and attempts to show where libraries stand in relation to games and where we can go from here.

Introduction

This paper is in three parts. Part 1 consists of big-picture findings and discussion of games and libraries. Part 2 is a series of tables that summarise some key information for implementing these ideas. Part 3 is a more journalistic description of the research trip and details of the findings therefrom.

Part 1: The big picture: the importance of games

Libraries began, physically at least, as simple book depositories. That is what *librarium* means: a room for books. A room with books in it, or even a shelf with books on it, is enough to constitute a library.

However, as an inevitable consequence of gathering large quantities of culture and information into one place, libraries almost immediately became very much more. They became less about the physical storage of ink on paper (although that was still essential to their mission, it was the means rather than the end), and more about being a single, central place where information and culture could be organised and made accessible; in other words, shared, and as efficiently as possible for those who sought it.

That core mission has not changed, but the forms in which libraries offer that access have expanded dramatically. Movies, music, talking books, TV series, comics and graphic novels, online services and databases, daily papers, magazines, and above all internet access: all are now more or less assumed to be normal parts of a library service.

There are some cultural forms that libraries tend not to store and share. By their nature, compactly storing and readily sharing examples of the visual arts (photography, painting and sculpture) is difficult, to say nothing of architecture or the theatrical arts. However, these forms have their own institutions and spaces (galleries, museums, theatres). Further, a library without a collection of *books* on all the above cultural forms (especially theatre: what is literature without Aeschylus or the Bard?) would quite rightly be deemed a rather poor one.

There is, however, one major and ancient cultural form that has received relatively little attention from any institution: games.

"Cultural form"?

This paper uses the term "cultural form" as shorthand for the various forms in which culture can be offered and experienced. The term refers both to physical medium and to modes of expression, access and engagement. Sculpture is obviously different to painting, though both are primarily visual modes of expression and are usually viewed in a gallery; but an oral narrative read aloud from a book, or recited verbatim by a group of traditional custodians, is also different to an oral narrative collectively improvised by a role-playing group.

The neglect of games

Where games are included in collections (as indicated by their visibility in the library catalogue), it is usually only as electronic games, and perhaps a copy of *Hoyle's* or a similar compilation of card games and a few rainy-day kids' activity compilations. Even "libraries of record" (for instance, legal repository libraries) do not see fit to include in their archives games published in their jurisdictions. Indeed, Steve Jackson, founder of Steve Jackson Games, one of the biggest independent publishers of hobby games in the USA, and a significant designer and developer of games, was recently asked to *stop* donating copies of his games to his local library of record in Texas (reported in conversation, 27 August 2011).

Further, based on my survey of library catalogues in Australia and the USA, any such inclusion is somewhat desultory. For instance, cataloguing says nothing meaningful about the type of game you will be playing, describing at most only the overt thematic elements rather than the gameplay elements. A system that fails to distinguish between fast-paced first-person shooter games and turn-based puzzle games, just because both feature zombies, cannot seriously have any taxonomic credibility, and more importantly is failing its users.

Finally, while many games are logistically problematic to include in a lending collection, even those that fit easily into libraries' circulation procedures are often neglected. Tabletop role-playing games, for instance, are essentially sold as books and can be catalogued and managed as such, yet very few libraries stock more than at most one or two token titles.

There are reasons for this neglect, including:

- libraries originally formed around written works, and these skew heavily towards solitary rather than social appreciation;
- electronic media are evolving rapidly, and terminologies and taxonomies take a while to spread;
- "games" (and "play") are undervalued by the culture as a whole;
- the competitive possibilities of games associated them with the gambling that often took place around their play.

None of these are actually *good* reasons when you look at them clearly.

Games and libraries: a natural fit

In fact, there are five excellent reasons why libraries (at least public and academic libraries) should be doing a lot more with games.

1. Games are important elements of culture

Games have been part of human culture about as long as there has *been* human culture. Given the number of oral cultures that play games, it seems likely that cultures tend to become ludate before they are literate. ("Ludate" is possibly my own

coining; it simply means competent in games and play the same way “literate” means competent in letters and reading.)

Games are not simply trivial ways to while away time, although some can be. (However, given some of the books libraries stock, triviality is not an objection in and of itself.) As with literature's ritual origins in drama and recital, games are often closely linked to the sacred, particularly to the divinatory. Playing the ancient Egyptian game of Senet was widely understood as a meditation on the afterlife, for instance, and it is noteworthy that the four suits of modern playing cards are derived from the suits of the tarot.

Even though games have moved a long way from those mystical roots, as literature has from its, it is hard to imagine European intellectual culture without chess, or modern American capitalist culture without poker, or Chinese scholarly culture without Go. Even among people who have never played the games, they are instantly recognisable. Indeed, in some dimly-understood way, they are iconic of something essential about their home culture, so that to be an exceptional player is to embody the key virtues of that culture.

This is so much the case that the State Library of Victoria (SLV) has a venerable collection of some thousands of chess-related books and articles, and boards for play, all housed in a dedicated room; yet people inquiring about further board game collections or activities at this same library have been told “that's not really what libraries are about”. (Reported in conversation, September 2011.) With all due respect to chess, drawing the line at chess is like ending your literature collection at Beowulf, or perhaps Shakespeare. It is certainly a pinnacle of the form, but there have been many noteworthy developments since, and any study of the field that stops there is woefully inadequate.

Despite this peculiar institutional blind spot, staff at the SLV have offered some excellent games initiatives. They already do quite a good job of making electronic games available for public use on a daily basis. They run world-class gaming colloquia annually. Even the tabletop gaming blind spot is slowly dissipating: in November 2011, the SLV hosted an event organised by the author, celebrating and sharing both electronic and tabletop gaming, to coincide with (and render *intemational*, although as it transpired this had already occurred) [National Gaming Day @ your library](#) (see Part 3).

2. Games, like libraries, both assume and foster community

The power of games to establish and reaffirm community is attested throughout history. We can start with the “Father of History”, Herodotus, and his account of the Lydians using games to keep their nation together through *eighteen years* of grinding famine and hardship (Herodotus, Book 1 par 94). We can trace that line through to today's extraordinary three- and four-day festivals of tens of thousands of supposedly antisocial or poorly-socialised geeks who disprove the stereotype (while embracing a great many more) with an extraordinarily warm, accepting and fun environment. To achieve such an atmosphere in crowds of nearly 37,000 this year in Indianapolis for Gen Con (Gen Con LLC 2011), and over 70,000 in Seattle for Penny

Arcade Expo (Magrino 2011) is no mean feat, one that other similar-sized crowds (for instance, sports crowds) can struggle to achieve.

Anyone who has successfully run an open all-ages games event can attest to the power of such events to get people interacting across every conceivable boundary: age, gender, ethnicity, culture; even, where the game is already known to both parties, language itself. Consider the Cold War chess tournaments between American and Soviet grandmasters, as an example.

Libraries must always support individual reflection and research; that is not in question. But increasingly, a library is more than a place for quiet study only. It is a community's gateway to culture and information, the "new village square", one of the last bastions of genuinely free, welcoming public space in an increasingly enclosed world, and an institution that by its nature assumes the existence of a group of people with overlapping interests. What could be a more natural fit for such a place than games, cultural forms that by *their* basic nature also presume people being brought together?

And, to approach the question from the other side: if you agree that games deserve institutions to support them, the way all our other cultural forms do, what would such institutions have that libraries cannot already offer?

Lastly, as lovers of libraries, do we really want to send lovers of games elsewhere, to arcades or to casinos perhaps, or do we want to welcome them in as yet more patrons, to enrich and enjoy the community we have already fostered?

3. Games are art (there's poetry in these systems)

Perhaps the least understood aspect of games is the nature of their poetry.

Even putting the words in the same sentence can seem jarring. However, games can be artfully and expressively, or in other words, *poetically* made, just as any other human creation can.

In 2005, the film critic Roger Ebert [argued](#) that video games could never be art (Ebert 2005), because their outcome was in the hands of players and therefore the experience was too variable between audience members. His position was maintained for some years; he withdrew from the argument not by ceding his point but by acknowledging that, having played almost no games, his qualification to speak on them was somewhat dubious (Ebert 2010).

Ebert failed to recognise that, as with a piece of music (or a musical instrument) that must be played, or architecture that must be explored, the poetry of a game lies in the spaces and possibilities it opens and shapes for exploration and how well (mindfully, consistently, creatively) it does so. Decisions and random inputs and tests of skill can be arranged into something expressive and surprising and true just as easily as tone and pitch, or colour and shape, or word and plot. I call this creative shaping of choice and consequence the "poetry of system".

The word “poetry” derives from “poiesis”, the Ancient Greek word for “making”. Its modern meaning of artful (playful?) language is actually a kind of synecdoche; the phrases “poetry in motion” and “poetic justice” are survivals of the fuller meaning, namely a broader sense of mindfulness, aptness and beauty in a human creation or act.

As such, every form of culture partakes of the quality of poetry, though due to modern usage the word seems less apposite applied to the visual and auditory media and fits most comfortably with linguistic works that operate simultaneously on symbolic, representational and aesthetic levels. Games, which often incorporate language into their play and almost always into their rules, are one such form.

However, each form by its nature most effectively expresses certain aspects of human experience. Just as paintings can express truth in ways that books cannot (and vice versa), games, as artforms that ultimately consist in the choices their audience makes and the actions their audience takes, can express things that no other form can.

It is true that subjectivity is difficult to consistently describe or depict in a game, whose palette ultimately consists of concrete verbs applied to more-or-less representative or abstract symbolic tokens. (Some games, particularly role-playing games, often introduce gameplay elements that attempt to make manifest internal qualities and promote consideration of interiority; but ultimately those mechanics exist to constrain players' decisions about *characters'* actions in the game world. One might argue that such systems express ideas about how subjectivity works in general, but the expression of a specific subjectivity is a different matter and is up to the players.)

However, skilful game designers can do more than express a subjectivity: they can *induce* it. The best game designers put their players in the position of making decisions and taking actions quite alien to their normal nature, often quite unwittingly, thereby showing us sides of our own humanity we may never have encountered, or challenging the assumptions we make about ourselves, our worlds, our capabilities, and the consequences of our actions.

For some examples, consider:

- Brenda Brathwaite's [The Mechanic is the Message](#) series (Brathwaite 2009; see also her discussion of the first few games [at her GDC presentation](#), Brathwaite 2010)
- Jane McGonigal's extraordinary [Find the Future](#) at the New York Public Library (McGonigal 2011a), or for that matter [Evoke](#) (McGonigal 2010)
- the brain-bending twists on time and space in [Braid](#) (Blow 2008) and [Portal](#) (Valve Corporation 2007)
- [Ian Bogost](#)'s work (Bogost 2011)
- the understated use of choice in *Star Control II* (Ford & Reiche 1992) and *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios 1997)
- *Werewolf* (originally a tertiary-level Soviet psychology exercise/experiment, and first known as *Mafia*), a remarkable rules-only game whose simple hidden-information setup generates extraordinary depth of social gameplay.

- the [transformative power](#) of role-playing games like [Steal Away Jordan](#) (Ellingboe 2008; see also Rhoer 2007)
- in general the indie art-games movement in both [tabletop role-playing](#) and [electronic](#) games.

4. Games have many ancillary benefits: literacy, vocabulary, numeracy, persistence, spatial awareness, threat anticipation, hand-eye co-ordination, socialisation and social skills

In an artform as varied as games, it is impossible to generalise about which other important life skills you pick up along the way. However, there is no question that unless you are playing a game of pure chance, playing games almost always carries a side benefit of learning or skill development.

Role-playing gamers can point to the polysyllabic words they learned in their games as the source of their rich vocabulary, or to the need to manage rolls and modifiers and probability as a source of numeracy. (See also Cardwell 1993)

Tabletop gamers of all kinds, who have to read the rules to work out how to play, know that literacy and comprehension can get a real workout in the process.

Gamers also often speak of the problem-solving skills that they have learned from games: breaking tasks down into manageable components, anticipating obstacles, and (although it is not so much a skill as a quality) sheer persistence in the face of a difficult task. It is certainly plausible that games teach a refusal to give up more effectively than other media do: words and images can praise it, or show it being displayed in admirable ways, but only games, as the only artform that exists in its audience's decisions and actions, can reward you directly for actually sticking at something. (Some might propose, for example, *Finnegans Wake* as a counter-example; I would argue that (a) those rewards are somewhat self-generated, and to the extent that is not the case, (b) *Finnegans Wake* is part game.)

Even games with no apparent educational value, the fast-paced action games like first-person shooters and racing games, develop hand-eye co-ordination and spatial awareness, which is not trivial. Five years ago, the training my reflexes and threat anticipation received from playing games that reward precisely those skills saved my life and my partner's: we came within fractions of a second of being sideswiped and crushed by a semi-trailer that swerved to avoid an unexpected obstacle on an interstate highway.

And any multiplayer games, especially tabletop, face-to-face games, cannot help but develop social skills as players learn that playing nice (taking turns, respecting rules and gameplay conventions) produces more fun more consistently than purely selfish behaviour.

It is indisputable that there are some dishonourable exceptions, especially online, where abusive language and intentionally aggravating behaviour are frequently encountered. However, a great many shy people, and people with autism-spectrum disorders, have said that games have helped build their social mindfulness and

confidence. Some have even developed leadership skills through managing guilds and clans. It is not chance that one of the key uses for board games in many libraries is to give rowdy groups of children or teens a way to channel and express their energy in ways that reduce their negative impact on other users of the space.

5. Games have core benefits: systems literacy and theory of mind

Important as literacy, numeracy and the rest are, not all games necessarily foster them. There are other benefits that are more or less inherent to games, however.

First, given that a game is a poetic system, playing games develops systems literacy: the skill of “reading” a system, thinking about the ways in which the components interact, anticipating outcomes, spotting advantage, and making decisions accordingly. (I draw a distinction between “systems thinking” and “systems literacy” similar to that between “reading” and “literacy”. The first is the core act, and the second is the skill that enables it.) Humanity has always been dependent on its ability to analyse and understand the systems around us, but as we continue to urbanise, and more and more social (and therefore mutable) rather than purely physical (and immutable) systems start to affect our lives, there are few more important skills. Whether in our work lives, in our personal lives, or in our lives as citizens, that ability to spot patterns and predict consequences, and therefore to choose not only our own actions but also their consequences with some degree of accuracy, is essential to any true freedom. In this connection, consider Donella Meadows's work: start with *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. (Meadows 2008.)

The fact that playing games also tends to cultivate a concern for and appreciation of fairness or "balance" in the rules at the same time it is teaching us to analyse them is a not-insignificant side benefit.

As games (and superficially game-like systems) are integrated into commercial and political propaganda, or are used as substitutes for actual management and motivation in the workplace via so-called “gamification”, to say nothing of the exploitative ways in which some games are milking players of time, attention and money, systems literacy becomes not only a highly transferable skill, but directly important in the context of games themselves.

The second inescapable benefit of any game played with another person is in some ways a subset of the above, and in some ways much more profound: playing games with someone forces us to engage with them in ways no other activity can. Plato never actually said “You learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation”, but there is a reason it seems plausible that he did. Games are an excellent way to develop theory of mind, and it is undeniably true that people sometimes show entirely other sides of themselves, good and bad, when the outcome “doesn't matter”. The ability to put oneself in other people's shoes is a crucial skill for any adult, for compelling reasons both moral and practical. However, most situations in which one can practice this skill either have nothing at stake, so no particular incentive to go beyond socially expected forms, or too much at stake for experiment or play (the best ways to learn) to be comfortable and/or ethical.

It is no coincidence that games have the ability mentioned above to foster interaction across cultural boundaries; on the contrary, it is a concrete manifestation of this deeper, less tangible benefit. I also believe that part of the reason that games build social confidence is that they build social skills. As the industry begins to publish video games like [L.A. Noire](#) (Rockstar Games 2011), which uses realistic facial motion and microexpressions as part of its core “spot-the-lie” investigative gameplay, this becomes explicit. However, multiplayer games have always relied upon the ability to infer intention and interiority: *Werewolf* (Davidoff 1986) is a prime example. It is no coincidence that the mathematical/logical study of decision-making in systems with multiple active participants, heavily used in economics, military studies and politics, is called “game theory”.

More reasons

There are many other reasons why libraries and librarians should be paying attention to games. To name just four more:

- they are currently on the cutting edge (or perhaps in the firing line) of the censorship/freedom of speech debate;
- they are the locus of a great deal of experimentation and innovation in publishing frameworks (much of which makes providing access easier, but requires work on how best to integrate the works and the new publishing models into library collections and policies);
- game design itself is undergoing an extraordinary renaissance;
- quite simply, they are popular, and the influence of games on other cultural forms is becoming ever more visible and important.

There is a compelling case for libraries to review how we integrate games into our collections and services. Below are some selected highlights from the omnigraphy, which offer some starting points into the topic.

Resources

- Liz Danforth, *Library Journal* games blogger, <<http://blog.libraryjournal.com/gamesgamersgaming/>>
- libgaming Google group: join at <<http://groups.google.com/group/LibGaming>>
- Games in Libraries podcast <www.gamesinlibraries.org>
- American Library Association, (Inter)National Gaming Day @ your library: public site at <www.ilovelibraries.org/gaming>, library resource site at <<http://ngd.ala.org/>>.
- Kelly Czarnecki, *Gaming in Libraries* (2009, see omnigraphy)
- Scott Nicholson, *Everyone plays at the library: creating great gaming experiences for all ages* (2010, see omnigraphy; also <<http://scottnicholson.com>>
- Eli Neiburger, *Gamers... in the library?! The why, what & how of videogame tournaments* (2007, see omnigraphy); see also <<http://gamesandlibraries.wetpaint.com/page/Eli+Neiburger+transcript>>.

Part 2: Practicalities: some summary tables

The tables below summarise my findings as to how libraries and games do and could interact.

Table 1 is a summary of how various types of games work in a library context, covering three topics: cost, management of the physical media that comprise the game, and the modes of access suitable for the library to offer: physical loans, electronic loans, and in-library use.

Table 2 offers a shorter summary of the same information from the opposite side of the question, listing which games are suitable for which library uses.

Table 3 lists the relevant information that should exist in the catalogue records of various types of games. I offer these with no claim to authority on the intricacies of cataloguing; however, the professionals need to start somewhere, and I hope this is a reasonable summary of the meaningful, identificatory distinctions between games.

Table 4 outlines the requirements of various types of games for library space, and their effects on that space.

Table 1: Games and collections (grouped by physical form of game)

Game type	Cost	Physical Management	Physical lending, e-lending, in-library
Board games (including tile-based games)	Moderate to high.	Moderate to difficult stocktake requirements, depending on numbers of components. (This is an area of opportunity for technologists.) Current library shelving is not really designed to store and display games, but nothing fancy is required except perhaps a little more depth than current options.	Given the inventory management problems, physical lending is problematic, though a library willing to strike a compromise between staff time to check playsets and not being able to guarantee completeness could manage. e-lending doesn't apply to most, although there is a game company called Cheapass Games which distributes print-your-own games for free (asking for a donation if you like them); essentially people print their own components and supply their own dice and counters. In-library use is common in both the USA and Australia, and is an excellent way of fostering communal use of the space.
Card games	Usually low.	See above; the fragility of cards can be an issue. It may be worth investing in card sleeves to protect cards and conceal damage.	See above.

Game type	Cost	Physical Management	Physical lending, e-lending, in-library
Collectible card games (CCGs; aka Trading card games or TCGs)	As much as you want to spend!	Difficult. If cards are visibly damaged (i.e. marked) they become unplayable. Would probably require the purchase (and frequent replacement) of card sleeves.	Physical lending is not an option, as they are too flimsy. Some CCGs do have online equivalents, and it is possible that a library subscription might become available. In-library use is possible, but cards will be stolen, as some are quite valuable.
Rules-only games	Free! Rules cannot be patented or copyrighted (though a particular expression, such as a specific text or diagram, <i>can</i> be copyrighted), and most of these games are in the public domain.	The rules exist as a form of words, so they can be catalogued as a text and/or published or linked from the library website (see note below). Some of them have accessories that aid play, such as pre-printed cards to help randomise events, but the whole point is that these are not necessary.	N/A. However, see Cheapass Games above.
Tabletop Role-Playing games	Books for the most popular games tend to be fairly high-quality colour folios, and there are no local role-playing game (RPG) presses, so moderate. However, core rulebooks tend to be cheaper to make it easy to buy into the game. Many games stores in Australia and the US will give libraries discounts on retail.	These are either books, or very occasionally kits like language kits. Occasionally a boxed set will have dice or cards in it, but in general it is just books, with <i>maybe</i> a couple of books and a map in a kit. In any case, the core rules are kept in books, and there is no good reason not to have them in the collection.	Physical lending and in-library play are both appropriate. E-lending is not currently available but there is interest among RPG e-book sellers. Format is restricted to PDF for most RPG books because of tables and graphics.

Game type	Cost	Physical Management	Physical lending, e-lending, in-library
Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARPs)	As for tabletop RPGs (above). Quality of printing (and sometimes size) is lower for LARP rulebooks, because they need to be portable and the play environment doesn't favour treating books with kid gloves, but the print runs for LARP books are usually smaller, so the cost roughly evens out.	As above.	Physical lending is simple. In-library play requirements vary widely with the nature of the game; in play, LARP can be described as a form of structured improv (improvised) theatre, so you want at least one largish space where people can interact freely (and usually dramatically) without causing problems for others.
Miniatures games	Fairly high, and since these are usually collectible games, potentially open-ended.	The pieces have varying degrees of robustness, but are tricky to mend, and depending on the game can be valuable enough to steal. Boards are usually stock card.	Lending is not an option, and e-lending defeats the point of having physical miniatures. Having some in the library could be worthwhile, but risks theft.
Wargames	Fairly high: these are basically miniatures games that usually require expensive terrain as well.	See miniatures games.	See miniatures games.

Game type	Cost	Physical Management	Physical lending, e-lending, in-library
PC games	High.	Treat as an expensive DVD with booklet.	Lending of any kind is complicated by licensing/digital rights management (DRM) gateways. Many games, especially “triple-A” blockbuster titles, require authentication of unique serial keys against an individual account, which means that only the first borrower can use them. One of the outcomes of my trip is contact with Valve (a top development studio with its own online authentication and game distribution system, called Steam) around trying to get some e-lending subscriptions working. (Stay tuned! Valve is open to the idea, subject to other commitments.)
Console games	High.	Treat as an expensive DVD with booklet.	Physical lending works fine at this stage, as the games require the proprietary hardware but no further DRM restrictions impede loans. E-lending may become possible via the various console networks.
Alternative reality games	Impossible to say definitively, but should be minimal to none.	Impossible to say definitively, but should be minimal.	N/A

NB I am not a lawyer and advice about the feasibility of lending or other uses does not extend to the legality thereof.

Note: there are a great many games, both electronic and tabletop, which are available online free of charge. Some are entirely free, some use an honour-system donation request as the basis for their funding, and some follow the shareware model and offer only limited functionality or the first instalment free and the full experience in exchange for payment.

I regard all these models as compatible with library sharing frameworks. None requires patrons to spend money up front; the only question is how comfortable libraries are with promoting one artist's sales prospects over another's. It could be argued libraries do this all the time by inclusion or omission from their collections, since people are always more likely to give books they have read and loved as gifts. Shareware works pose a slight complication, but such games could be evaluated for inclusion in collections strictly on the basis of the free component only.

As the open-source movement grows, libraries could have an increasing role in acting as a curator or custodian for growing amounts of free content. Growing numbers of serious authors and artists have been publishing their work under licenses such as Creative Commons, and these creators deserve support and exposure through libraries as much as those using traditional publication models. And just as with traditional publication, the fact that there is dross in the mix makes librarians' trained eyes *more* necessary rather than less.

Table 2: Game types suited to various library uses

Library use	Suitable game forms
Lending	RPG books, Electronic games that don't require registration, Simple games with few (or generic, easily-supplied-by-borrowers) components.
In-house use (similar to reference use)	Board & card games with multiple small parts.
Curation	Rules-only games, Free (especially browser-based) electronic games, Make-your-own games & PDF rulesets (such as Cheapass Games), Possibly some alternative reality games.
Subscription services	Some online games, Some ebook-based games, particularly role-playing games, Electronic games subject to digital rights management (DRM), Online versions of board/card games (including collectible card games, such as <i>Magic: the Gathering</i>). Both download/DRM services and cloud computing services, such as Steam and OnLive respectively, may be worth investigating. Steam in particular looks very promising. Its parent company has a strong educational focus, and an employee has entered (very preliminary) discussions with the author about the possibility of offering such a service.
Host venue only	Collectible card games, Miniatures games, Wargames, Alternative reality games.

As library services continue to morph into the future, new opportunities may become available. For instance, if print-on-demand becomes something libraries are interested in pursuing, many tabletop games (particularly role-playing games) might be reprinted in libraries.

Table 3: Cataloguing tags (grouped by game)

Note: A frequent abbreviation below is "Game/ruleset; set."

"Game/ruleset" refers to the name of game or of the system of rules by which it is played. Some games, particularly role-playing games, share basic rules but use different narrative settings or additional, specific rules. Being able to find other games that are compatible in this way is important.

The "set" is a particular release of items or game components within that system. Many highly modular games, especially collectible cards or miniatures games, issue periodic updates or expansions of new (and reprinted) cards/miniatures/components which increase the options available for play. The process is somewhat akin to an edition of a periodical. Such sets often have distinct mechanical and/or thematic identities or other coherent design qualities that make grouping them meaningful in more ways than only chronologically.

Game type	Medium	Gameplay	Theme
General (all games should record this information)	Physical components supplied; physical components players must supply; space requirements; potential numbers of players; typical duration of play; suggested age range or rules complexity.	Stochastic/deterministic (role of chance); perfect/imperfect information (how much player can see about state of game); rules interactivity (where on the spectrum from indirect to zero-sum, i.e. from race to fight); social interactivity (where on the spectrum from party game to players interacting only through the medium of the game); adjudication requirements.	As for movies: subject headings and age rating.
Tabletop game (card, board, etc)	Game components (dice/tiles/cards/boards/etc). Including an accurate inventory is particularly important.	Standard mechanics (e.g. trick-taking, bluffing, bidding, scoring, elimination).	As above.
Collectible card games	By their nature, these games are unlikely ever to be used in a library except as part of a giveaway: they are easily damaged and stolen, and acquiring complete sets is problematic. But just in case: Game/ruleset; set.	These games usually use proprietary mechanics, so there are no standard mechanics to which one can refer. However, some games are well-known enough that it might be worth considering cataloguing some of these.	As above.
Rules-only games	None.		As above.

Game type	Medium	Gameplay	Theme
Tabletop Role-Playing games	Ruleset (e.g. Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, World of Darkness, systemless, etc); Gamist/Narrativist/Simulationist.	Resolution mechanic (dice/cards/non-random); Various subheadings to indicate the type of RPG book (headings we have used at Port Phillip: Adventures and scenarios, Campaign settings, Character options, Combat, Core rules, Creatures and non-player characters, Equipment, Optional rules, Powers and magic).	As above.
Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARPs)	Ruleset (e.g. World of Darkness, Mind's Eye Theatre, freeform, systemless, etc); Gamist/Narrativist/Simulationist.	As for tabletop RPGs.	As above.
Miniatures games	Game/ruleset; set.		As above.
Wargames	Game/ruleset; set.		As above.
Electronic games	Technical requirements (platform, minimum specs, additional hardware requirements if any).	Player perspective (1 st -person, 3 rd -person, isometric, etc); dimensions of environment (2D/3D) and degrees of movement (translation/rotation in X/Y/Z planes), though this may best be inferred from gameplay genre; gameplay genre(s) (real-time strategy, turn-based strategy, first-person shooter, first-person stealth, tactical, action, adventure, racing, fighting, puzzle, platform, etc).	As above.
Alternative reality games (ARGs)	As ARGs are usually heavily cross-media, potentially any of the above. Space requirements and participant numbers are likely to be key factors.		

Table 4: Space requirements/impacts

Game type	Minimum space	Ideal space	Impact on shared space
General	Space where speech is permitted.	Varies widely, but accessibility is obviously key. Most games benefit from tables, and almost all from chairs or other seating, but the ability to move furniture around (and even stack it out of the way) is a key to good gaming-space design. A visible but soundproof design (with sightlines to rest of library for supervision of the space and visibility of the game) is a good compromise between protecting other library users from the noise of the game and letting them know a game is being played and they may have an opportunity to join in, or at least use the same space themselves at another time.	Volume: most games are likely to get loud at some points. The frequency and intensity varies with the game; many are fine by current public library standards.
Tabletop game (card, board, etc)	A table. Most tabletop games have no more than 6 players, but party games (which often have teams) can have more.	Quiet enclosed space (but with sightlines to rest of library for supervision/visibility of game) with table.	Volume, potential loss of study space
Collectible card games	See tabletop.	See tabletop.	Volume, potential loss of study space.
Rules-only games	Usually chairs, possibly tables if pen & paper involved.	Quiet enclosed space (but with sightlines to rest of library for supervision/visibility of game), possibly with table.	Volume.
Tabletop Role-Playing Games	Depending on the game, see tabletop (most) or rules-only. (Some RPGs are played purely by narration).	Depending on the game, see tabletop (most) or rules-only (some LARPs).	Volume, potential loss of study space.

Game type	Minimum space	Ideal space	Impact on shared space
Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARPs)	See rules-only games.	Depending on the game, private space.	Volume, potential visual distraction as players move about (especially if players are costumed).
Miniatures games	See tabletop.	See tabletop.	Volume, potential loss of study space.
Wargames	See tabletop. Wargames tend to take a <i>lot</i> of table space as the game terrain tends to be much larger than other tabletop game boards.	See tabletop, with larger tables. The ideal wargaming table can be covered or otherwise left undisturbed between sessions, to allow for long-running battles that may take several sessions to resolve.	Volume, potential loss of study space.
Electronic games	Non-quiet space with chairs, a screen and a console or PC.	Multiple screens without line-of-sight to each other, multiple networked devices, headphones to each device (to prevent gaming cacophony and overhearing giveaway audio cues), appropriate seating, a master display to which all devices are connected, a central console which is able to switch/mix which device(s) the big screen shows, a noticeboard (electronic or otherwise) for posting tournament placings and other public information.	Volume, visual distraction.
Alternative reality games	As in cell to right.	Varies wildly depending on game. The library is most likely only a venue and will probably have been selected for its pre-existing qualities, so willingness to try is the key factor.	

Part 3: The research trip

In August 2011, the author travelled to the United States to study games, libraries and how they intersect and relate.

The objectives

The first objective, in recognition that US libraries are beginning substantial initiatives to incorporate games into their services and collections, was simply to travel around and see how games were actually being used in libraries around the USA. The focus was heavily on public libraries, but academic and state libraries were also visited.

The second objective was to look at games from the other side: to look at the industry and what is happening there that libraries might like to latch onto, and what libraries could offer gamers and games culture, just as they offer so much to readers and book culture.

The itinerary

The first stop on the trip was Indianapolis, IN, where the author visited both the Indiana State Library and the Marion County Public Libraries' Central Library, and attended Gen Con Indy.

The second stop on the trip was New York, NY, partly for research in both libraries and schools, and partly on personal time. While in New York the author visited the New York Public Library and the Mid-Manhattan and Grand Central branches of the associated municipal library, and attempted (but unfortunately failed) to visit an extraordinary school called Quest 2 Learn.

The third stop was Reno, NV, where the author visited the Sierra View branch of the Washoe County Library and the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Centre at the University of Nevada, Reno, and attended the 2011 World Science Fiction Convention (alias WorldCon, it is perhaps best known as the venue where the Hugo Awards for science fiction are given out).

The fourth stop was San Francisco, CA, a brief, mainly personal stop, where the author visited the Main Branch of the San Francisco Public Library (and the writing workshop and pirate-themed shop 826 Valencia).

The fifth and final stop was Seattle, WA, where the author visited the Central Branch of the Seattle Public Library and attended Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) Prime.

In addition to the libraries actually visited, the author spoke with librarians and staff from Pierce County Library (WA), the King County Library System (WA), Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Carolina, and several librarians currently travelling the country looking for work.

About the three conventions

Gen Con Indy

Gen Con is one of the longest-running tabletop and role-playing game conventions in the world; it originated in the basement of Dungeons & Dragons co-founder Gary Gygax in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, with some 20 attendees in its first year, 1968. Since then, it has grown substantially and moved towns several times, and is now run by a dedicated company (Gen Con LLC). The company runs Gen Cons around the world, including Gen Con Oz in Brisbane in 2008 and 2009, but the main convention has been based in Indianapolis since 2003.

In 2011, Gen Con Indy had attendance of approximately 37,000 unique visitors over its four days, and additionally featured its first Trade Day, with a full day of sessions aimed at retailers, teachers and librarians on the day before the official start of the convention. The librarian and teacher streams of this day were both highly worthwhile and are recommended to anyone thinking of attending.

Gen Con itself features a great many sessions by game designers talking about their craft as well as a massive dealers' hall where game companies come to sell their wares, and is an excellent place to talk to makers of non-electronic games about their industry. It also features block-sized open gaming rooms where anyone can sit down and play, and a travelling tabletop games library.

WorldCon

The World Science Fiction Convention is perhaps best known as the place where the prestigious Hugo awards are presented. WorldCon began in 1939 at the World's Fair in New York as science fiction fans attempted to take advantage of the opportunity to organise an international gathering of like-minded people. Since then it has run every year except the four years 1942-1945, travelling around the world. The 2011 WorldCon, held in Reno, Nevada, hosted an estimated 6000-7000 unique attendees over its four days.

Although not strictly game- or library-related, it features large numbers of both gamers and librarians, as one would expect of a gathering of literate and literary geeks, and in fact this year hosted several workshops around game design featuring well-known designers. While not a core feature of the convention, it also hosted an independent travelling games library, and tabletop and party games were very much in evidence.

PAX Prime

Held in Seattle, PAX Prime (so-called to distinguish it from a recently-spawned sister convention, PAX East, held in Boston earlier in the year) is another games-focused convention, but although tabletop games are decidedly present, it is focused much more heavily on electronic games. The attending demographic is correspondingly slightly younger on average, and marketing budgets are typically much larger. So is the attendance, at around 70,000 unique paid attendees, plus between 3,000 and 5,000 forged 3-day passes and an unknown number of false single-day passes on

top of that, as the convention sold out 3 months in advance. The convention is not only about gaming; it is also a celebration of geek culture generally, with attractions including well-known artists and musicians who create for a geek audience or use geek tropes in their work.

Funding & disclosure

The total cost of the trip was approximately \$10,000 (including only travel costs, convention registrations and basic necessities such as food and accommodation), plus around \$3,000 in wages foregone during unpaid leave.

The catalyst that made the research trip possible was a \$5,000 travel grant awarded by the Spydus Users' Network (SPUN). SPUN is an incorporated association based in the state of Victoria, Australia, which exists to provide online and in-person opportunities for users of the Spydus Library Management System (LMS) to co-operate, share ideas, skills and resources, and to nominate and vote on suggestions for improvements of the Spydus software to its creators, Civica. Although Civica sponsors SPUN, including by providing the funds for the annual travel grant, SPUN is legally independent of Civica, and the recipient of the annual travel grant is decided by the SPUN Executive.

In short: a library vendor (Civica) was the original source of the money, but the organisation to whom the author is obligated and accountable (and grateful) for the funds is an association of libraries that all use that vendor's LMS, rather than the vendor itself.

All costs in this section are presented in Australian dollars.

Summary of findings

The uses to which games are being put by the libraries visited in the course of the trip, and the games-related businesses interviewed and their interest in (and opportunities for) libraries, are tabulated at the end of this section. Those results are summarised briefly below, and heavily inform the observations in Parts 1 and 2.

US libraries differ from Australian libraries very little in the way games are used. At least at the libraries visited, the same assumption that games are primarily for children and teenagers prevailed, and games are used in much the same ranges of ways as in Australia. That said, the USA is also home to exceptional and pioneering efforts such as those at Ann Arbor, home of keynote speaker Eli Neiburger and his remarkable videogame tournament systems.

The greatest difference between Australia and the USA on this topic is not so much what is happening at individual library services, but the visibility of (and willingness to promote) the various local games initiatives, both to the public and to the profession.

Libraries in both Australia and the USA offer a mix of lending collections, in-library tabletop games and game consoles that varies widely from service to service. There

are some exceptional cases in the USA (Ann Arbor District Library and ImaginOn are examples) but overall the mix of services and collections is fairly comparable, especially given the smaller scale here in the Antipodes.

Where the USA is far ahead of Australia is in awareness and networking. Library bodies in the USA have been talking about and promoting games in the library for some years now, and have done much more work to provide a framework for the kind of intelligent, shared culture around games that libraries have successfully developed around books.

International Gaming Day @ your library

One key example of such promotion is the event that began in 2008 as National Gaming Day @ your library (NGD@yl), and has steadily grown ever since, formally transforming into International Gaming Day as of 2012 after years of international participation. (American Library Association, 2011)

Each year in November (as of 2012, on the first Saturday of the month), libraries around the world host games events ranging from tabletop gaming festivals to electronic gaming tournaments (including tournaments *between* library services, thanks to the efforts of Eli Neiburger and his colleagues at Ann Arbor, who apparently always win).

Participating in a large event such as that, and knowing that it is one of many participants in a global event, is a powerful way of stating that libraries are a place for their communities to share games just as much as any other form of culture, and something I hope ALIA and LIANZA will consider.

ALA's Games and Gaming Round Table (GameRT)

After some years of having a games and gaming interest group, ALA has formally established a Round Table on the topic. (Round Tables are special interest groups with some extra formal standing. They can charge membership and recommend policy to the wider organisation.)

As with any new opportunity or area of work, having a proper forum for interested parties to share ideas and collaborate is essential. Again, this is something ALIA and LIANZA should consider emulating.

Games industry support

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a community heavily populated by studious, intelligent, creative types (but gratifying nonetheless), many of the people in the games industry who were surveyed during this trip were fans of libraries and enthusiastic about the prospect of working with them. Both game makers and librarians attested that game companies were very supportive of libraries that stocked their works. Whether because, as systems thinkers, they recognise the incredible value of the library to the educational and cultural life of a community, or simply because they were bookworms themselves growing up and their local library fuelled their imaginations, libraries received even more warm words from this group than usual.

Tabletop games

Tabletop games companies were the most consistently supportive. More than one librarian reported that they had written to a tabletop game company to inquire how much it would cost to replace game components that had gone missing, only to receive the requested parts and some extra spares free of charge with the reply. Given international postage costs, this kind of liberality may be a little too much for Antipodean libraries to expect, but these anecdotes are indicative of an enthusiasm for libraries whose motives extend beyond marketing and into genuine personal appreciation on the part of many games makers and retailers.

Australian retailers are similarly willing to support libraries. All the Australian retailers interviewed while researching this paper (several Good Games franchises, Mind Games franchises, the Melbourne store Games Lab and the bulk discounter MilSims) expressed a willingness to offer discounts to libraries.

Role-playing games

Support was particularly plentiful from the tabletop role-playing community. This is perhaps not surprising given the narrative, imaginative nature of such games, and the previously-mentioned fact that role-playing games (RPGs) are essentially rulebooks, making them very easy to stock within existing library systems.

Wizards of the Coast, publishers of the iconic *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, expressed considerable interest in having the games stores that are part of their distribution network co-ordinate with libraries, both with *D&D* and with their massively successful collectible card game *Magic: the Gathering*. (Tulach, 2011) Paizo, publishers of the popular *Pathfinder* RPG, were even more enthusiastic, and were very open to the idea of their play networks working directly with libraries. (Watters & Mona, 2011) Both Paizo and Wizards of the Coast have organised communities of volunteer players who run introductory sessions of the game. This is perhaps worth considering as a source of low-cost programs to fill out the library's calendar.

RPG e-publishing

DrivethruRPG, an e-book seller specialising in role-playing game PDFs (it has sibling companies that retail e-comics and fiction e-books), also expressed considerable interest in selling to libraries. (Wieck 2011) They did note that as a small business they would need to have a clear sense that it was worth the cost to code a suitable interface for library e-lending. However, its extensive back catalogue and print-on-demand capabilities (including a press being opened in Australia last year) mean that it can supply a great many titles in hard copy that would otherwise be impossible to find. While print-on-demand is not a technology libraries use much currently, this may well change in coming years as the publishing industry continues to incorporate new technologies and libraries shift their service models accordingly. Whether or not libraries are printing the books, however, the notion of "out of print" will become increasingly redundant. As a small publishing sector with strong and respected DIY/self-publishing traditions, whose books habitually have small print runs but a long window of relevance, role-playing game texts will particularly benefit from this shift. (RPGs were pushing the envelope on e-publishing some years ahead of the mainstream.)

Electronic games companies: Steam-powered libraries?

Support from electronic games companies was less uniform, but several key companies expressed a desire to support libraries. One in particular, Valve, makers of the popular *Half-Life* and *Portal* series and the Steam games marketplace software, has already been dedicating substantial time and energy to supporting schools with Steam for Schools, a specially-adapted version of the Steam client designed to meet classroom teachers' needs and enable access to games relevant to science, technology, engineering and mathematics curricula.

When approached about libraries subscribing to Steam as an e-lending service similar to EBSCO's e-books service, which Steam is technically well-suited to do, Valve were open to the idea. Given other obligations, they are unable to commit to such an enterprise at this point, but they are considering it, and are assessing how much interest there is from libraries in such a prospect.

Please contact the author if you believe your library would be interested in pursuing such a model for lending of PC games.

Last-minute addendum: e-lending of games already trialled?

Just before submitting this paper for publication, the author has learned that this business model has been trialled by Florida's Orange County Library System in conjunction with well-known makers of casual games, Big Fish Games (Orange County Library System 2011; Big Fish Games 2011). Anderson Public Library in Indiana and Rockford Public Library in Illinois also seem to have subscribed. (Anderson Public Library, 2012; Rockford Public Library, 2012)

Preliminary web searching (Guza 2011) suggests that the company behind this service is Library Ideas, the same company responsible for Freegal. It also seems that, as the Big Fish Games subscription service is not mentioned on their site (Library Ideas LLC 2012), the service may longer be on offer.

The parameters of this trial were far from ideal: all library services seem to have offered 2-day loan periods for a form that generally requires several hours to complete. This seems far too constrictive, given that most library services will issue a 2-hour movie (which, being non-interactive, can more easily be watched in conjunction with other demands on the borrower's time) for at least a week.

Without drawing any conclusions about the causes, this does reinforce the need for libraries to be very clear about what levels of access are a bare minimum for the service to be worthwhile for patrons.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned library services and companies may well have interesting insights to share.

Table 5: Specific US libraries and uses of games

Source: Personal interviews with staff at the respective branches

Library	Lending	In-house	Programs	Other/notes
Indiana State Library	-	-		
Marion County Public Libraries (Central Library)	Some electronic games	Some electronic games and some tabletop games, both typically aimed at children or young adults. Some public use of internet PCs for online gaming (eg Runescape)	Used as part of a science-themed school holiday program	Some very playful uses of other technology. For instance a mock TV studio/green screen in the children's area which allowed children to insert themselves into video footage
New York Public Library (Stephen A. Schwarzman building)	-	Find the Future (McGonigal 2011a)	Find the Future	-
New York Public Library (Mid-Manhattan branch)	None. The service had tried, but gave up due to high rates of theft.	Ad hoc, organised on a branch-by-branch level. None at this branch.	Some activities for kids and teens as part of a school holiday program	-
New York Public Library (Grand Central branch)	As above	An Xbox and some board games in a dedicated teen area	As above	-
Washoe County Library (Sierra View branch)	Small lending collection of console games	Tabletop games kept behind the children's desk for kids and teens; a couple of dedicated Linux-based games PCs for children	Occasional games events	-

Library	Lending	In-house	Programs	Other/notes
Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Centre, University of Nevada	Some electronic versions of board games on a Microsoft Surface (coffee-table-sized touchscreen)	None, but students commonly bring tabletop games into the library, and an adjacent café has games which are apparently heavily used	None	-
San Francisco Public Library (Main branch)	None	Some at branches	Regular activities at branches	-
Seattle Public Library (Central branch)	A relatively large RPG collection	Up to individual branches within the service. Board games, puzzles and gaming PCs available for children and teens.	Kits available for branches, with Wii consoles and games ready for games events.	-
Pierce County Library (<i>interview only, no visit</i>)	None	Games consoles at some branches	Attempted gaming program for 20-30 year olds 2 ago – not much interest. Lots of interest from teens – electronic games, CCGs, etc.	Noted shift in attitudes to gaming, increased demand. Also noted excellent support from games makers.

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