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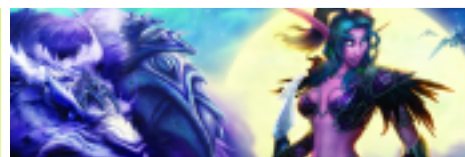
GET YOUR



GAME ON



WHAT MAKES A  
GOOD GAME, ANYWAY?



*[Editor's Note: Welcome to VOYA's new gaming column by expert gamer/librarian Beth Gallaway, who will cover everything that YA librarians need to know to support the hottest new library service for teens. Find it in April, August, and December issues. Also see our special February 2005 issue on "Gaming with Teens in Libraries."]*

As a young adult librarian, I subscribed to gaming magazines, linked to online games on our teen Web site, bought a few video game strategy guides, and helped patrons of all ages print out cheat codes for games. Yet I never associated these activities or my own passion for playing *Tetris* and simulation games with the possibility of game collections in libraries—until a teen volunteer asked why we couldn't circulate games. Our impromptu gaming advisory board presented the director with a persuasive argument including a collection development policy, a list of opening-day titles, and the loan of a console and a handful of games. It was a hard sell, but the director was impressed with the group's enthusiasm and verve. Our library established a small but well-rounded collection of PC and console games.

Garnering teen input to develop teen collections is at the core of young adult librarianship, but the librarian new to the concept of gaming (and tuned in to the negative portrayal of gaming in mass media) might be leery of simply accepting youth recommendations. The *Get Your Game On* column will be a collection development resource for librarians interested in using developmentally appropriate games for programs and collections, and/or for meeting curriculum needs. Its primary focus is video games (see sidebar). Today's consumers want favorite stories in many forms, often simultaneously. Because of crossover appeal, this column might periodically investigate card, board, or dice games related to video games.

#### WHAT IS A VIDEO GAME?

In this column, the word "gaming" always refers to the act of playing video games—never to casino gambling! "Game" refers to any games played through an electronic medium:

- On the Internet, via a Web site or digital download
- On a CD-ROM played on a computer
- On a CD-ROM played on a computer with an Internet connection required
- On a CD or cartridge on a stand-alone console, requiring a television or other monitor
- On a CD or cartridge on a stand-alone console, requiring a television or other monitor and a live Internet connection
- On a handheld device such as a Palm Pilot, cell phone, or personal or handheld system

#### THE STORY OF A GAME

What qualities justify spending 25 to 50 taxpayer dollars on a game? It all boils down to one thing: replayability. Consider what makes a book re-readable. We relate to well-executed stories composed of elements that work together as an integrated whole, allowing us to empathize realistically with a familiar situation or to play out an experience we haven't had. Start thinking of games as just another format to tell a story; suddenly those reviews in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* make a lot more sense. Here's how story elements play out in games:

**Plot:** Games evolved from the simple graphics of *Asteroids* to the text-based play of *Zork*, forcing designers to become vivid writers as well as good programmers. Today every game has a premise, and plot must be fleshed out with character, dialogue, and actions that further the adventure and immerse the player as an active participant who contributes to the story. The best games offer multiple storylines in which each choice leads in a new direction.

**Setting:** No matter what the location is, the physics and other rules governing the game world must be believable and consistent. Attention to detail in realistic settings enhances gameplay. In games such as *World of Warcraft*, the player has impact on the game world.

**Character:** Most games, from *Mario Kart: Double Dash!* to *Project Gotham Racing 3*, require the player to choose or create a representative avatar who performs the action of the game and interacts with creatures, objects, and the game's setting. Often familiar stock characters from literature, mythology, and psychology appear—the hero, the princess, the wizard, the fool. A computer-generated Non-Player Character (NPC) might have a set of five stock phrases or fifty, moving in ways that grow repetitive and predictable. Another NPC might react to your character's moves. The smarter and less predictable the artificial intelligence is, the more challenging and fun the gameplay becomes.

#### MULTIMEDIA IN GAMES

Audiovisual and gameplay characteristics might be new territory for bibliophiles. Graphics, sound, and game engines combine to create multi-sensory, believable gameplay.

**Graphics:** Beautiful, seamless, and cinematic images share equal value with content and presentation. Gamers want to participate, not watch long cut-scenes as in *Final Fantasy X*. Graphics must be fast-loading, with zero lag time to cause stuttering or skipping images. High-quality design means believable physics (kick a wall and a hole appears) and no clipping or ghosting (seeing characters or objects through walls). A game shouldn't require the best or newest hardware to run properly. Cool digital effects and name-brand designers can be



a draw, but convincing execution is more important. Environmental details like shadows and weather add to the setting, tone, and mood; environmental impact such as sustained damage is impressive.

**Sound:** Ambient sound adds to the setting and gives clues about what might happen next. A musical score sets the mood and tone. Speech imparts information about character by what is being said and the tone used. As graphics continue to improve, facial expressions synchronize with the audio. Voice-over acting by celebrities and soundtracks by popular and up-and-coming musicians are growing trends that make for an award-winning soundtrack for **Grand Theft Auto: Vice City**.

**Modding:** The game engine (the set of program code and software that gives a game its look and style of play) should include custom options. Many games are now packaged with tools that allow players to film their in-game play, modify in-game objects, or take apart the game's code and use the engine to create their own games. End User License Agreements (EULA) and Terms of Service (TOS) vary in their permissions for gamers to make changes to copyrighted content (and profit from it). Read the fine print.

## VIDEO GAME ACQUISITIONS

Like books, games are not purchased directly from publishers or manufacturers, but there are many options for acquisition. Future columns will contain game reviews and note only one edition of the game, indicating if other platforms are available. The following retailers are also resources for checking availability and pricing.

GameStop (<http://www.gamestop.com>) is the largest retailer of video games in the United States, and the only retailer with a video-game focus. GameStop sells new and used games, consoles, and console accessories as well as action figures, trading cards, and strategy guides. WalMart, Best Buy, and Circuit City also sell games, but for knowledgeable staff, GameStop is your best bet, with online ordering and reviews at your fingertips as well as a locator for their 4,400 stores. Online bookstores, including Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>) and Barnes and Noble (<http://www.bn.com>), sell games at a small discount.

Library jobbers are getting into the act and distributing games—Baker and Taylor (<http://www.btol.com>) has standing-order plans and sells titles for all consoles, and Thomas Kline/Crimson Multimedia (<http://www.crimsoninc.com>) provides CD-ROM products and console games. Known for its craft and activity supplies, S&S Worldwide (<http://www.ssw.com>) now sells **Dance Dance Revolution** as a fitness activity. Playfirst (<http://www.playfirst.com>) and IGN's Direct2Drive (<http://www.direct2drive.com>) will save you a trip to the store through digital downloads. Downloaded games are hosted on a single computer, not circulated; the Terms of Service permit creation of one backup copy. ■

## RESOURCES

### GAMES

**Asteroids.** Atari Games/Midway, 1979.  
This classic "shoot-'em-up" arcade game can be played online at <http://www.springfrog.com/games/asteroids>.

**Final Fantasy X-2.** Square Enix USA, 2003. (Playstation 2.) \$49.99.

Tenth in a series, *FFX* was the PS2's first role-playing game. Beautiful graphics and turn-based combat have made it a popular title.

**Grand Theft Auto: Vice City.** Rockstar Games, 2002. (PlayStation 2.) \$49.99.

Available in several platforms, this groundbreaking game is known for its boundary-less environment, creative soundtrack, and innovative lawless premise.

**Mario Kart: Double Dash!** Nintendo, 2003. (GameCube.) \$49.99.

This mischievous and competitive racing game has numerous combinations of tracks, characters, and vehicles.

**Project Gotham Racing 3.** Microsoft, 2005. (Xbox.) \$49.99.

This fast-paced racing game features career mode and numerous combinations of tracks, vehicles, and locations.

**World of Warcraft.** Blizzard Entertainment, 2004. \$49.99.

<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>. Online subscription: \$15/month.

This MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game), considered to be the new golf because of the real-life networking accomplished within its fantasy realm, has more than ten million players globally.

**Zork.** Infocom, 1980. (PC.) Download and play at <http://www.csd.wwo.ca/infocom>.

*Zork* was one of the first text-based adventure games and is considered to be a form of interactive fiction.

### MAGAZINE

**Electronic Gaming Monthly.** Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. \$9.99/issue, \$19.97/year. <http://egm.1up.com>.

This monthly magazine includes news, reviews, and cheats for console and wireless systems.

### WEB SITES

**1Up.com** <http://www.1up.com>

The publisher of **Electronic Gaming Monthly** and other console and computing magazines, **1Up** has extensive features that include blogs and podcasts in addition to reviews, forums, and news.

**Game On! Video Games and Libraries** <http://libgaming.blogspot.com>

Keeping librarians up to date on gaming news is this supplement to the Google LibGaming listserv, a discussion forum about gaming in libraries at <http://groups.google.com/group/LibGaming>.

**Gamespot** <http://www.gamespot.com>

Not to be confused with **GameStop**, **Gamespot** offers news, reviews, cheat codes, and more for every platform.

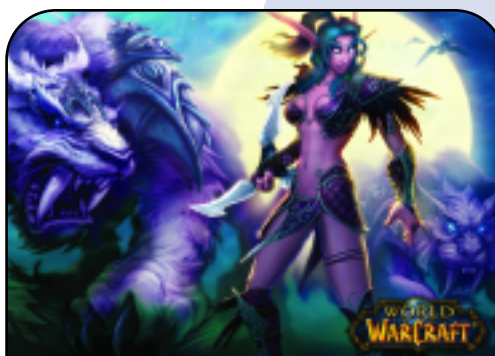
**GameSpy** <http://www.gamespy.com>

Like **Gamespot**, this ad-heavy site has news, reviews, cheat codes, and more for all platforms, and is affiliated with FilePlanet for downloads and free trials.

**Library Successes: A Best Practices Wiki: Gaming**

<http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Gaming>

This wiki compiles resources from the library community such as core collections, articles, and lists of gaming-friendly libraries.



Beth Gallaway is a trainer/consultant at the Metrowest Mass. Regional Library System in Waltham, Massachusetts, and co-chair of the Teen Gaming Interest Group for the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). Visit her avatar, Cerulean Vesperia, in **Second Life** at the library on Info Island (128, 128, 27) and urge her to get back to work on her book about gaming and libraries, forthcoming from Neal-Schuman in 2007.