Tales from *Play It Loud*

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Abstract

This report describes my experience of introducing and managing the *Play It Loud* gaming program as the supervising young adult librarian at the Northeast Regional Branch of the Richland Library in Columbia, South Carolina. An assessment of the program's effects against a number of The Search Institute's "40 Developmental Assets" suggests that the program has had a positive impact on its participants. The success of the *Play It Loud* gaming program suggests that multiplayer games, both electronic and analog, have the potential to create positive links from player to player and from player to library and that there is great potential for future gaming programs to combine with other youth programs to form a clearly educational component to a library's overall programs.

Building Blocks

The introduction of gaming programs in the Northeast Regional Branch of the Richland Library in Columbia, South Carolina, was sparked by a meeting between me, as the youth services librarian, and the branch manager. I already had considerable experience with video games. I also believed that an audience existed for gaming programs at the library. My belief was based on seeing well-read library copies of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, for example, and observing teenagers playing games in the library building. These seemed to me to be clear signals of the potential popularity of gaming with patrons. The branch manager was open to the details of the program I suggested and trusted me to implement the program.

I already had experience in an independent study involving the Georgetown library in South Carolina. Georgetown's gaming program was grant-

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funded, and it had high-definition televisions, headphones, user sign-in, volunteer supervisors, tournaments, and even academic grade-point-average requirements. While such resources would not be available to me at Richland Library, especially early in the program's life, Georgetown's program provided a model of civility and fair play that made a strong impression on me. When I introduced the program at my branch, Richland Library was already circulating a pair of Nintendo Wii video game consoles between its locations for programming purposes. The Nintendo Wii video game console, released worldwide in 2006, uses motion-sensing remote controllers similar in shape to a television remote, with several optional controllers that attach to the Wii remote controller. Richland Library also circulated a versatile collection of Wii games that could change on demand and had a stash of tabletop games that were easy to set up and explain, including checkers, chess, *Monopoly*, *Clue*, *Scrabble*, *Munchkin*, *Uno*, *Zombie Dice*, and *Jenga*.

In setting up the Richland Library Northeast program, I also called on the lessons of Scott Nicholson's free online course about gaming in libraries through Syracuse University. Nicholson focused on analog games but offered strong advice that applied to any gaming program. The popular example of tabletop gaming, *Monopoly*, could be described as a repetitive series of dull game mechanics that take hours longer than it should to provide an inviting, enjoyable experience. According to Nicholson, good group gaming should offer constant and varied opportunities for players to participate, whether in a competitive or cooperative fashion. Different games should be provided for different kinds of players according to the kinds of intelligence required. Nicholson described his S.N.A.K.S. model of game archetypes: Strategy, Narrative, Action, Knowledge, and Social. He suggested that providing games involving a mixture of these archetypes was the best course of action in devising a new gaming program because it would potentially involve the widest variety of gamers (Nicholson, 2009).

The program at Richland Library Northeast was designed to focus on multiplayer experiences that could accommodate four or more people at a time. For the Wii, a multiplayer focus meant using titles such as *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, *Mario Kart*, *Bit.Trip Beat*, *Wii Sports Resort*, *Just Dance*, and *Kirby's Return to Dreamland*. Each of these games allows new players to jump easily into the game and begin participating. These games also represent the video game genres of platforming, fighting, racing, rhythm, sports simulation, dance, and platforming, respectively. The library program's games had to contain content appropriate for teens or younger children. This requirement excluded first-person shooter games and titles rated M by the Electronic Software Ratings Board. One goal of the program was to avoid forcing anyone to wait in line. Another goal was to create positive social experiences for

participants, whether they played cooperatively or competitively. Library staff had regularly witnessed children, teens, and adults playing *Farmville* or *Bejeweled* on the library's public computers. These are games that promote limited social experiences in virtual environments. The new gaming program, however, was designed to offer more abundant opportunities and more varied and effective experiences than such games provided.

Play It Loud

The program had to be loud. *Play It Loud* was used in marketing materials so that anyone who read about the program would immediately know that it was not a matter of sitting quietly and being shushed. (The name was also an obscure, personal nostalgic reference to having grown up with Nintendo, whose advertising slogan in the early 1990s was "Play It Loud.") Richland Library Northeast was fortunate enough to have a large meeting room space across a hallway from the rest of the building, so loud events would not disturb anybody. Here, video games could also be projected onto a drop-down screen.

The layout plan was to set up the projector with the Wii in the center of the room and encourage people to play in the ample floor space there. This allowed space along the sides of the room for setting up tables for board games. Snacks were prohibited in order to prevent crumbs, salt, and smears from getting on the Wii controllers, as well as to deter anyone from camping in the room to eat rather than participate. Nonfiction books relating to video games and fiction titles targeting the average age range in the room were placed on display in the room, and patrons flipped through them between gaming sessions.

Play It Loud was scheduled on a monthly basis, always on a Saturday afternoon. The regularity was meant to encourage repeat participation—irregular program scheduling would alienate would-be participants who had trouble remembering when programs occur.

Play It Loud was originally conceived for a strictly teenage audience, but from the time of its inception, it served as a family program. Over the course of the fiscal year, *Play It Loud* generated an average attendance of twenty-one participants, with extremes of eleven and thirty participants. The majority of participants were in the age range of nine to sixteen years, with the occasional small child or adult. *Play It Loud* rapidly became a fixture of Richland Library Northeast's weekend programming. Some participants began to bring their own controllers from home. During weekends that did not include *Play It Loud*, parents and children would ask what had happened to it. *Play It Loud* was scheduled twice as often over the summer, to popular reception. It got to the stage that children began to ask the desk staff how much longer they had to wait even before I had begun to prepare the room.

Go Your Own Way

Another result of *Play It Loud* was branching the board game *Go* into its own program, *Go Your Own Way*. The program was based on an ancient Chinese board game that was easy to learn, hard to master, and accessible to all age groups. Two players took turns placing black and white stones on a board in an attempt to surround the other player's stones and gain the most territory by the time the board becomes full. My interest in *Go* began after visiting the American Go Foundation's booth at the American Library Association's annual conference in 2011 in New Orleans (http://agfgo.org/index.html). Here, the foundation promoted a special offer for libraries in which instruction booklets, *Go* equipment for different levels of player expertise, and promotional materials would be shipped to any organization for free that wanted to host a *Go* program. The book *Go as Communication,* by Yasutoshi Yasuda, about the benefits of *Go* to various communities, was also available for free on request. In addition, the twenty-three-book manga series *Hikaru No Go*, about a hero's journey centered on the playing community of *Go*, would be provided for the cost of shipping. I leapt at all of these opportunities.

One of our earliest *Go* tutorials was at the Richland Library Southeast branch, where another youth services librarian, Amy Allen, supported a demonstration of *Go* as part of her *ReFresh Start* program designed to appeal to multiple age ranges in the community. This event involved many separate tables for demonstrating different life skills. *Go* was included as part of the "Brain Games" table. Several people stopped by the table to ask about *Go* and look through an instructional booklet, but few people sat down to try it out. We decided that this experience indicated that a more dedicated, targeted approach was required that would allow participants the time needed to explore the game in-depth.

Many participants in *Play It Loud* enjoyed *Go*, especially parent–child duos, but exposure to the game was hampered by the blaring sounds of the Wii games. Some *Go* players would start a *Go* session while waiting for another turn with the Wii, then abandon the game once the Wii was available again. By creating a program devoted to *Go*, players could focus entirely on the board game. Teen volunteers helped as tutors and spokespeople for the program—convincing someone to play a completely new game was easy if others were already enjoying the game and were able to explain the rules.

Go as a standalone program had attendance by ten or fewer people at most sessions, but the interactions among players have been nothing but positive. The game flattened almost all differences between players—age and gender had no noticeable correlation with playing style. These observations echo those of Yasuda, who supervised a *Go* game between special-needs students and a team of teachers (Yasuda, 2002, p. 26):

> The final game started. It is probably beyond your imagination how the game went. Some of the children lay on the floor, some danced, and some sang. The teachers looked very serious, contemplating their moves. A few minutes later, one of the special needs children captured more than 10 stones! The fifth graders did not realize what had happened at first, and there was complete silence for a moment. In the next moment, the gymnasium was full of thunderous applause. Some punched their fists in the air; some shouted "hurray!" The fifth graders were as overjoyed as if they themselves had won the game. The special needs children had also jumped with joy, but the teachers were dumbfounded.

The nature of the game required spatial reasoning mixed with a logical understanding of metagaming. The term *metagame* refers to "the highest level of strategy in many complex games" and involves "any aspect of strategy that involves thinking about what your opponent is thinking you are thinking" (Urban Dictionary, 1999–2013, s.v. "metagame"). In effect, *Go* allows an individual's reasoning strengths to show through the game no matter if they are "left-brained" or "right-brained."

New players were inducted into *Go* via a version of the game advocated by Yasuda called *First Capture Go*. In this case, the first player to capture any of the opponent's stones instantly wins (Yasuda, 2002, pp. iii–v). Playing *Go* in first-capture format led to quick turnaround times—capturing a stone usually happened in under five minutes. Short play time prevented players from becoming frustrated at losing a full game of *Go* over the course of two hours. In fact, after several matches of *First Capture Go* on the small 9 × 9 practice board, new players tended to express a desire to play on the larger 13 × 13 board and then asked to play by the official rules on a full-sized 19 × 19 board. Graduation from *First Capture Go* on a small board to playing a full game on the official board worked for girls and boys, adults and children. *Go Your Own Way* profited from its diverse crowd. Younger players achieved higher self-esteem from playing against older players, especially when they beat them. More experienced players were familiar with letting a first-timer experience victory to increase interest in the game, but sometimes they were surprised by how fast some players reached the upper skill level of the room.

Impacts: Developmental Assets

Many of the goals of *Play It Loud* and *Go Your Own Way* aligned with the forty developmental assets as outlined by the Search Institute (Search Institute, 2007). The Search Institute organized years' worth of surveys of more than a million sixth- to twelfth-grade students and the adults in their lives to gauge the impacts of different behaviors on young people's lives. Their research showed that

> the more developmental assets young people experience, the *more likely* they are to engage in a wide range of thriving behaviors, such as being successful in school, valuing diversity, maintaining good health, and taking leadership responsibilities (promotion); and the *less likely* they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors, including use of alcohol and other drugs, violence and antisocial behavior, problems in school, gambling, and eating disorders (Roehlkepartain, Benson, & Sesma, 2003).

During both *Play It Loud* and *Go Your Own Way*, library staff observed behaviors that correspond directly to the developmental assets. Each quote below is from one of the Search Institute's developmental assets.

"*Family Support*: Family life provides high levels of love and support." Some parents would drop their children off at a program and then browse the collection or Internet at their leisure. So long as the children behaved themselves, staff members provided supervisory services. Other parents sat with their children, interacted with staff about the nature of the program, asked questions, and then sat back and encouraged their children as they played or even learned a new game along with their children. Among siblings who learned to play *Go* together, one would often become the tutor for the other, leading to two-on-one challenges to the librarian in charge.

"*Positive Family Communication*: Young person and his or her parent(s) communicate positively." Parents and children learning games together was always a bright spot in *Play It Loud*. Sometimes a parent supervised a board game in the form of teaching everyone the rules of *Clue*, and the children would listen and enact the rules as instructed. Other times, parents have been deputized *Play It Loud* referees who monitor the room for fair play and explain different rules. Parents encouraged their children and used positive language regarding their performance in a given game, especially dance titles such as the *Just Dance* series that require players to perform dance moves in time to popular music according to on-screen prompts.

Go also encouraged positive parent–child communication. In one session, as a child learned the rules and played a practice game, his mother tried to kibbutz from over his shoulder. Her well-intentioned advice was based on a logical understanding of an aggressive, checkers-like strategy, but the child was placing his stones on the board in reaction to my stones' formations—in other words, the child's understanding of the game was more advanced than his mother's. Staff invited the mother to play and watched them both develop personal strategies and counterstrategies over the course of several games.

"*Other Adult Relationships*: Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults." During the course of *Play It Loud*, a young person in the library generally received positive reinforcement from three staff

members: the person who recommended the program; the youth-services librarian who supervised the program; and the branch security guard, who used the program as an opportunity to relate to younger patrons in a positive manner. All such interactions were a boost to the library's image in the eyes of patrons.

"*Caring Neighborhood*: Young person experiences caring neighbors." This asset usually manifested in the form of different players sticking up for each other in the name of fair play. If someone tried to take an extra turn or play in someone else's role, the other players responded and either corrected the issue themselves or brought it to the supervisor's attention to sort out. Bullying was discouraged, and players were given positive notice.

"*Community Values Youth*: Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth." When parents watched games from the sidelines, they often shared positive reactions with all of the players. They also vocalized their support within earshot of the players of a gaming program that is open to the community. The staff made a point of responding to arriving players in a positive manner. It was a goal for *Play It Loud* not to be perceived as a corner for dumping bored children. Their presence was wanted by the library and by peers.

"*Service to Others*: Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week." Teen and junior volunteers often helped set up and break down the meeting room that was used for play. This included moving tables, chairs, and library equipment. Sometimes staff instructed a teen volunteer to tutor other players in how to operate a new game.

"*Safety*: Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood." Bullying was not tolerated in the library. Before particularly active games, staff reminded everyone to dance at beyond arm's length from each other, and in the event that anyone was accidentally knocked upside the head with a Wii controller, library staff paused the game to check that the player was alright.

"*Family Boundaries*: Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts." In the case of an unruly or impolite player, parents made clear to their children that tantrums and rudeness would be punished and that the library existed for the benefit of everyone, not just the squeakiest wheel. Additionally, some parents ensured that homework was completed before allowing participation.

"*Positive Peer Influence*: Young person's best friends model responsible behavior." After every competitive game, whether analog or digital, staff asked that the players involved shook hands and acknowledged a "good game" to each other. Players were quick to model this behavior as soon as they saw it exhibited by others, and it led to a civil environment devoid of sore losers. Although most participants were accompanied by parents, some were invited by their friends to come to the library to play. Peer-influenced library invitations were especially prevalent during the summer.

"*Youth Programs*: Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations." While *Play It Loud* was hardly an "organization," staff used each teen program as an opportunity to inform young and adult patrons of the other programs offered by the library system. Program calendars were passed out; teens who expressed interest in certain activities or books were asked to come back to the library to participate in related programs.

Play It Loud demonstrated value as a means of building bridges to stalled youths. Gaining public trust and attention through games led to finding opportunities elsewhere in the library. Staff saw library teens dropped off at the library with little or no supervision who became familiar to staff via *Play It Loud* and/or the anime club, made friends with peers, and wound up volunteering on weekends or joining the Teen Advisory Board.

"*Honesty*: Young person tells the truth even when it is not easy." Players did not always want to give up their controller. Some would take a moment to consider the players around them before admitting it was someone else's turn.

"*Responsibility*: Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility." Participants were told not to remove any gaming equipment or games from the room. Sometimes a young person wanted to call out to someone in the hallway and unwittingly stepped outside with a game controller in hand, or wanted to show a parent a game for future reference. Staff held people accountable for these behaviors and reminded them that the library's equipment was for everyone's enjoyment. Once, there was an argument between two children in which a boy hit a girl with a Wii controller by accident. The boy's mother took notice and asked him to apologize. Staff went a step further and asked them to shake hands, to which the girl replied, "I can't shake his hand, I don't know where it's been!"

"*Cultural Competence*: Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds." Gamers of black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern descent played together, including different forms of slang and dress. For example, a family in which the women wore burkas played board games with another family that wore crucifixes.

Impacts: Other Observations

Certain gender gaps were bridged during the course of *Play It Loud*. A case in point is *Just Dance*. Younger children and girls tended to jump right into the *Just Dance* series, even if they had never played it before. Preteen and teen boys, however, liked to write off the game as "silly," "girly," "stupid," and "gay." The other players and staff were always quick to correct that use of "gay"; otherwise, the boys held on to their opinions of dance games. They watched the girls and younger children have fun for a song or two, during which time the boys continued to act too cool to play along. By the

fourth song, they quietly asked to join everyone else. The transformation from mockery to requesting permission happened quietly and to the side but was no less beautiful to behold. There was also the victory of a videogame causing people to work up a sweat through dance. No one knew where that seed would lead, though the library also hosted *Zumba*, the dance fitness program, and line dance classes.

Just as boys eventually came around to play games they perceived as being for girls, girls came around to playing games they viewed as boys' territory. Staff saw groups of four to six teenage boys dominate certain competitive games such as *Mario Kart*, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, and *Wii Sports Resort*. Often, girls of any age waited out these games in favor of *Just Dance* or playing a tabletop game with each other. However, one day, with a crowd of teenagers in the room, staff organized a *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* tournament and a couple of teenage girls joined in among ten capable, competitive teenage boys. *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* requires a high degree of hand-eye coordination in order to push buttons in strategic sequences to gain victory in combat as a Nintendo character over characters chosen by other players. One girl played well but was defeated. The other girl won the tournament. The boys played as characters that wielded projectiles and swung swords, projecting images of danger and edginess. The female champion played and won as the pink puffball named Kirby. The boys considered her one of the group after her win.

Some of the most pleasing proofs of impact came from parents who commented about the positive effects of young people playing games together in a safe environment. Several *Play It Loud* participants had gaming consoles at home but had only played multiplayer games online or with a family member. For them, *Play It Loud* represented an opportunity to socialize with other gamers of various stripes.

Conclusions and Next Steps

After incidents with younger players, an age limit of players to those ten and older was enforced during *Play It Loud* sessions. Adults generally stayed out of play, with the exception of parents who wished to dance to familiar songs during *Just Dance*. The most problematic demographic group comprised children around the age of five. During the program's early months, teens helped their younger siblings learn the ropes of various games and modeled good behavior. However, the program was sometimes temporarily derailed by the occasional small child who threw a tantrum at every prospect of giving up the controller, no matter how many times others explained the rules. Sometimes small children repeatedly asked when their turn would come up, only to then flail the Wii controller in their hands during their turn without any control or self-awareness. Perhaps a gaming program intended just for this younger group would have worked out well, but *Play It Loud* struggled to cater to children and

appeal to teens at the same time. Including one group tended to alienate the other.

Other consoles have been under consideration for inclusion in the program. As of November 2012, the successor to the Nintendo Wii, the WiiU, has been available, offering asymmetric gameplay in the form of a tablet-like controller that allows one player to interact with a separate screen and controls than the other players who interact using the regular Wii remotes. The WiiU is able to play its predecessor's video games, meaning it already has a large library of available games to offer.

Play It Loud was not unproblematic for all its fun. Regardless of the developmental assets it embodied, the core activity of *Play It Loud* was young people playing video games. My philosophy of young adult programming was to provide entertainment before involving educational or creative components. My attempts to branch out from *Play It Loud* into other forms of play, for example, *Minecraft* (http://www.minecraft.net) were met with varying degrees of resistance from teen patrons. And other options were explored.

Go Your Own Way saw limited success in the beginning but ran into a cluster of new players when *Go* was played alongside a *Book Bingo* program attended by parents and children. As soon as *Book Bingo* players were done, they readily absorbed the rules of *Go* and played several rounds of *First Capture Go*. This cooperation between programs increased the attendance of both, leading the teen and children's librarians to collaborate toward other programs that both could facilitate. *Go Your Own Way* has also adopted the incentive of books as prizes, offering free books to any program participants who are able to complete a special *Go* challenge: capture one of the librarian's stones before he is able to capture three of the patron's stones.

Despite the issues that arose during the course of the implementation of *Play it Loud* and associated programs and the changes that we needed to make, the core goal was consistent: to provide shared gaming experiences for the different types of gamers to which the library was central. We believe that the goal of the experimental program was met, and we are working toward further expansion and continuous improvements.

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