Three Different Paths for Tabletop Gaming in School Libraries

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ABSTRACT
Three school library staff members explore how they have used tabletop games in different school library settings. Teresa Copeland (Tesseract School, Paradise Valley, Arizona, USA) explores how tabletop and role-playing games have been integrated into the curriculum across a wide variety of grade levels. Brenda Henderson (Trinity High School Learning Resources Centre, Redditch, UK) discusses how a board game club has made a difference in a high school library in the United Kingdom. Brian Mayer (School Library System, Genesee Valley Educational Partnership, LeRoy, New York, USA) supports multiple school libraries in finding matches between the curriculum and authentic games and runs game design workshops.

INTRODUCTION
Gaming in school libraries is evenly split between two primary goals: education and recreation (Nicholson, 2008). Some libraries have worked with teachers to integrate games into the curriculum. Other libraries have created recreational programs around games where students can engage with each other in a safe space. One advantage of gaming programs in school libraries is that tabletop games, if chosen properly, can be both educational and recreational. Good educational games are also good games, and recreational tabletop gaming facilitates social engagement, planning, decision making, and mathematics.

The focus in this article is on nondigital games: board, card, and role-playing games that are played on tables instead of on screens. Most students are used to digital games but may not have familiarity with tabletop gaming. Tabletop games are inexpensive, have a long shelf-life, are portable, and can be used in a much wider variety of classroom situations than
their digital counterparts. In addition, as the players of a tabletop game have to make the mechanics of the game operate manually, players can gain a better understanding of how the game works than if they are pushing buttons and having a computer facilitate the games. Players can also adapt the game to their play situation, can easily work on teams to play the game, and can speed up or slow down play as needed based on the group.

In this article, three school library staff members explore how they have used tabletop games in different school library settings. Teresa Copeland explores how tabletop and role-playing games have been integrated into the curriculum across a wide variety of grade levels. Brenda Hendersen discusses how a board game club has made a difference in a high school library in the United Kingdom. Brian Mayer supports multiple school libraries in finding matches between the curriculum and authentic games and runs game design workshops.

**Tesseract School, Paradise Valley, Arizona, USA (Teresa Copeland)**

The Tesseract School is a PK–12 independent school. Games are an important part of the curriculum throughout Tesseract’s program. While the library hosts a variety of games for use during free periods and lunch, most game playing at our school is part of class. Games let the students be active and involved, learning in ways they enjoy.

In the library, second graders play the card game *Apples to Apples* to build vocabulary, then use the cards in a noncommercial game called “Dictionary Races,” in which they see how fast they can find a word in the dictionary. This helps them practice alphabetical order as well as the skill of skimming for information. Third and fourth graders play *Flash* games on the federal OnGuardOnline site (http://onguardonline.gov/) as a fun way of learning about online safety.

Kindergarteners play *I Spy* video games, helping them to build word recognition, along with many other games on both computers and iPads. Every classroom from early childhood to eighth grade has access to iPads, which are loaded with educational games, and students have times in which they are allowed free play on them. iPad games are also introduced in class so students know what games are available. Popular recreational games like *Angry Birds* are used to examine physics and the concept of force. Math at every level incorporates games to extend learning, from Sudoku for logical processing to the card game *Set* for pattern matching and understanding characteristics.

Every October, the freshman class at Tesseract dons chitons and himations and transforms into the jury at the “Trial of Socrates” for the longest and most involved game played at our school. Students spend the months leading up to the game studying the time period, as well as reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This role-playing game is one of the highlights of
the semester. The Trial of Socrates is a narrowed-down version of Barnard College’s *Threshold of Democracy* by Mark Carnes and Josiah Ober (2005), a *Reacting to the Past* role-playing game the college developed to help make history more engaging. Students receive character sheets detailing their background, alliances, and goals; chance is determined by die rolls; and the librarian acts as game master overseeing events. The enthusiasm the game brings to the study of the ancient past is unmatched by any other project. Students pore over Plato, looking for evidence of guilt or innocence while they write speeches that must stay in character and avoid anachronisms. The game follows them home as they conspire with other students, often stepping into character at lunch or during breaks.

The game encourages clever thinking, as students can expand on what they know of the time period to achieve their goals. For example, one student asked if she could follow another character one night, as she was suspicious of this other character. This was not covered in the game, but the student points out that she is playing a wealthy character and thus must have servants who can help. It makes sense in the time period, so we, as the facilitators of the experience, allow this to happen. After a few favorable die rolls, she uncovers a Spartan plot. This is a good example of an advantage of in-person role-playing games: the teachers and facilitators can adjust the game on the fly to encourage creativity and meet the needs of the classroom. It also rewards the students who research the most into the time period.

The speeches every year are passionate as the students become deeply invested in their character winning, so they put more effort into the game than they do for most other traditional assignments. After the game, students spend time discussing the issues that arise: When does speech become treason? Where is the line between protecting the free exchange of ideas and protecting the safety of citizens? How does our democracy reflect the democracy of Athens? These after-debates are always very lively and are a good example of the importance of reflection after playing a game.

The Socrates game has led to a teacher-written “Salem Witch Trials” game for seventh-grade students. In the Salem game, students experience the effects of hysteria on a society. They are also taking on the roles of real people and learn primary source biographical research as they prepare for their own, reading actual trial transcripts and other documents related to the real events before they make their own decisions about what to do during the trials. Many of the students find it hard to face people accusing them of things they know they are innocent of but cannot defend against. The Salem trials have also allowed discussion of how easy it can be to get caught up with a group that is lying about someone, especially if one is afraid of what will happen if one admits the deception. Role-playing games are under development for eighth grade, as well as plans
for sophomores and juniors to use other games from the *Reacting to the Past* series. Role-playing games are not just for the older students, as third-grade students play a simple tabletop role-playing game that places them on a sailing ship in the age of exploration, discovering the many dangers on a ship as well as the terrible food.

Each role-playing game is tied to a theme of study within the curriculum. Like many other live action role-playing games and simulations, the end of each game is determined by the players over different iterations of the game: Socrates has been acquitted, sentenced to prison, and committed suicide. The spy character has been caught, not caught, and sometimes killed. Some accused witches have escaped, avoided conviction, or turned on their accusers instead and made their own accusations. In each case, the games capture the student’s attention and focus. They also make for lively class sessions as the students take control and the adults spend most of the time watching from the back, occasionally rolling dice to check on chance and keeping the game on track. The students enjoy the change from traditional class time and remember the games for years afterward.

The high school also has an opportunity between semesters to take a one-week intensive course on a subject not usually offered. One such course has been Games and Play. Students spent the week playing games, creating their own games, and learning about the effects of play on the brain. At a presentation afterward, the students spoke about their week of play, stating that they learned how important games and play were to learning and how fast the week went by. Several expressed the desire to see more games in class.

At every age level, we have found that games keep students tuned in and participating, which means they are paying attention and staying on task.

**Trinity High School Learning Resources Centre, Redditch, UK (Brenda Henderson)**

Trinity High School Learning Resources Centre caters to years nine through to thirteen (the age range being between thirteen and eighteen in the United Kingdom). After a “Board Gaming in Public and School Libraries” seminar, a board games club was set up after school in the school library, called “Unplugged.” Meetings are held once a week and there are between six and twelve students who attend regularly. The games that are most popular are *Zombies, Marrakech*, and, the latest addition, *Ticket to Ride*. The students also play cards and chess.

Because it is an after-school club, games are limited to those that last only about one hour at the maximum. We are restricted to a certain extent—no extensive games of *Monopoly* can be played, for example—but the time limit leads the club to short, good games.

Other related clubs can provide a good starting point for a gaming
club. The library also currently runs a club for Manga, which are Japanese comics, once a week, and this provided a core club membership to start with, as several students were interested in playing board games. Both clubs attract students who are not interested in other, more traditional after-school activities, such as sports. An informal survey of thirteen students during a recent meeting showed that, of these, only two attended another club after school, and only one of those was sport related, the other being a computer club. School libraries can often be a haven for such students who are less inclined to join in with obvious team sports, but providing board games can encourage team building and socializing aspects that they might otherwise miss.

Funding originally came from an existing Learning Resources Center stipend of £1500 (about US$2284) per year, the initial cost of setup being around £80. Now established, the club has been allocated a small annual amount of £25 (about US$38) from the main school budget for buying more games. Because most games cost around £30 (about US$46), the Learning Resources Center will still have to support the club activities in part.

The benefits have been enormous for all the students. Because the games are facilitated by the players, they must read and understand sometimes complex rule sets and perform mental arithmetic. These games also teach social skills, as players have to learn how to take turns and “play nice.” Some play games at home, while others have never spent time with a board game; therefore, some students are used to taking turns, while some are not.

Learning how to handle losing and winning “gracefully” can be difficult at first, and it can be particularly interesting to see how the students deal and cope with their peers when they are not playing the game “right.” It is also encouraging to see cross-year friendships develop, as the younger students value the people they know in the upper years.

Even playing a simple card game such as Cheat has benefits. One older student was overheard carefully and very patiently explaining to a younger and far less numerate student how to play and where the numbers came in sequence: 7, 8, 9, 10, Jack, and so on and then back down, Jack, 10, 9, 8. Both students benefitted from that experience.

As a board games club, it is also possible to introduce different types of games to the students. For example, Forbidden Island is a collaborative game where players work together to escape a sinking island. Collaborative games require players to put aside differences and learn how to work together.

Dealing with Bad Players
This is a situation that usually comes up at least once in every game. With a regular club membership (and occasional semiregular “guests”), it does
not take long to identify those who become angry or upset if they are los-
ing. There are also players who will always be “right” about the rules (even when they are not) and will always try to impose their view on the others.

Within the age range of our particular club, bad losers are more likely to have either misunderstood the rules or consider that other players have not been “fair”; “If he hadn’t bent the rules to move his piece, then I wouldn’t have lost mine.” Occasionally, they may have made a move by ac-
cident or forgotten to move their piece properly. Generally speaking, the clearest way of dealing with a problem is to reiterate the rules and stick to them ruthlessly. If, however, a player has made a genuine mistake, then the other players might be asked to compromise, such as, for example, if the losing player continues, particularly with a new and unfamiliar game.

Again, with the player who is convinced he or she knows the rules and insists on the game being played according to his or her method, waving the rule book and reading from it is the best way to keep play on track. It may be the player’s way of playing it at home, but when in the club, unless everyone has agreed to the change, the rules are always as given with the game.

Students were asked during one session why they enjoyed the club; their replies are given next, followed by some personal observations.

“No one plays at home.”

Undoubtedly, board games in the library fill a gap where students have little or no opportunity to play board games outside school. Many of these students play single-player video games at home but miss out on the chance to engage with others over games. This is so particularly in high school, where breaks are used for socializing or grabbing something to eat and not playing the imaginative games that might occupy younger children. The game group gives these high school students a chance to play games with others.

“Here you can play with your friends.”

Not all children have a wide circle of friends, and not all students have the opportunity to have friends around or visit other houses to play. A student knows that he or she will be able to play a game with a like-minded group in a safe space.

“The games are looked after here; all the pieces are in place; and so on.”

Environment and game quality play an important part. If the games are set out on the table, in a pleasant and comfortable environment, they are far more appealing. Games are chosen that look intriguing as well, such as Marrakech, which has colorful rugs as part of the playing pieces, and Zombies, with the fun in creating a whole town using the street-based cards. Because they are always stored away after each session, under supervision, there is an opportunity to make sure all the parts are back in the box and any damaged pieces are mended.
“Here there are different games that I wouldn’t buy or have at home.”

Modern designer board games are more expensive than mass-market games like Monopoly, particularly the more elaborate ones, and the majority of students would not be able to afford them themselves. As the organization is one person’s sole responsibility, it is easier to learn what games the particular club members might enjoy and start to explore the more unusual games, rather than the commonplace Monopoly, Clued, Game of Life, and so on. While there is nothing particularly wrong with those games, some of them are too long for the duration of a club session, and many students have played those at home, if they do play board games at all.

“Nice teacher!”

An enthusiastic board game facilitator running the club is essential! Without someone who enjoys the dynamics and is happy to explain the rules many times, it would not get off the ground. As members of the group learn games and are comfortable teaching the game to others, they often split off, some playing one game by themselves while a new game is explained to others. Ideally, it should begin to run itself, with old-timers explaining the rules and so on to new members.

“It’s more sociable.” “You can play with more players instead of just one other person.”

Most board games are designed to be played with more than one person. Playing games in a club creates the situation for more players to make the game more interesting. Having a variety of opponents also avoids the “stalemate” situation that can arise when two evenly matched people are playing a game. For example, in game like Monopoly, if both people have half the board each, it really just becomes a battle to see who happens to land on the other’s property more often.

“When there is a group, you can work out different rules.”

Board games are surprisingly adaptable. During play, we have sometimes discovered rules that do not work or suit the group particularly well. There is discussion among the players and a decision is reached to drop or change the rule. Without the concept of cooperation and consensus being stressed to the students, there has been a practical demonstration of the need and benefit.

“It’s good to have someone explaining rules to you.”

Whenever a new game is bought, it is important to try playing it out, even just with oneself, to see how the rules work, or to take it home and play it with others, so that when introducing it to the students any potential confusion is anticipated and it will be easier to find where in the rules answers
to problems can be found. It can be quite challenging explaining the purpose of a game to the students. For example, a student who is not able to grasp the rules quickly and needs a more thorough explanation may be sitting at the table with another who wants to jump ahead and ask what ALL the pieces are for without waiting to hear the purpose of the game.

“The club has helped me make more friends.”

From observation, participating in the club has had beneficial aspect on behavior for some students. There are a couple of pupils who, in other curriculum areas, require support. Neither started with a particularly wide circle of friends, but being part of the board games club has expanded their social circle and enabled them to establish cross-year friendships, which was of particular importance when they were newer students.

**Developments in the Future**

It would be good to see more use made of the games resources in the general curriculum. All the games are on the library lending system and teachers can borrow these to use in class if they wish. Running an in-service event for teachers where they play the games would encourage teachers to become more comfortable with these new games and consider ways to incorporate them.

Several of the games could be used in a literacy capacity. For example, one of the board games seminar speakers recommended *Zombies* as a useful story-writing prompt. In this case, students used game play to expand on various points along a story line. If their piece attacked and killed a zombie character, they wrote that scene out more fully, using the card instructions or the tile location to expand the detail. For example, a “skate shop” tile has a car crash that could be described more fully; one of the action cards states “your shoe’s untied,” and a student could write about how he or she felt trying to tie the lace in a panic or in the dark.

Any school library could benefit from a board games club. It provides another reason for students to use the library. It encourages the use of the area as a sociable and relaxing place, particularly after school. Many students take the opportunity to borrow and change books. It encourages cross-year friendships. After the initial purchase of a few games to start off, it more or less runs itself. Above all, the students enjoy it and gain positive experiences and social skills to take with them after leaving school.

**School Library System, Genesee Valley Educational Partnership, LeRoy, New York, USA (Brian Mayer)**

I am a gaming and library technology specialist who works for the School Library System of the Genesee Valley Educational Partnership. We provide support, training, and resources for twenty-two school districts across five counties in rural western New York State. Over the course of the last
five years, I have helped build up a game library of more than two hundred modern board and card games, aligned to both state and national learning standards. Each of these resources is made available for loan to the libraries that we service in an effort to support student learning and growth through play. In addition to loaning resources, I work with school libraries and classrooms to help incorporate and implement games and other game-related experiences into the curriculum.

The process begins with the selection of resources for inclusion in the collection. Any game is held up against four criteria when being considered for acquisition. First, the game’s primary design should be to provide an engaging play experience. Second, the game should connect to the curriculum through the mechanisms used to play the game, the theme in which the game incorporates, or the strategies used to succeed. The third criterion, time, is an element that needs to be taken into consideration but does not exclude a resource outright. Instead it feeds into the last criterion, the game’s return on investment. This last criterion compares the game’s impact on student learning against how much time, effort, and energy are needed to implement the resource.

The next step is getting the resources out into the schools, either through direct loans to the libraries or through planned collaborative work among the school librarians, classroom teachers, and myself. The latter may take a number of forms, from guiding participation in government class through a game of *1960: The Making of the President* to bringing in several shorter game titles that are all focused around a curricular concept or skill to provide a single experience. In either case, the games serve as a space in which students can explore, apply, and manipulate many of the ideas being addressed in the classroom in a dynamic, yet nonthreatening environment. Using games has been very well received by both the students and the teachers, especially with students who struggle with the more traditional ways of classroom instruction. There is a tipping point about twenty minutes into play for most students where the experience goes from being a chore to a challenge. This is usually when their expectations for an “educational game” have not been met and they realize they are playing a fun and challenging game. That is why the first criterion is so vital, because without the authenticity of the game experience, the engagement and connection with the students are often lost.

These interactions have been the base on which the program has grown, but the last two years has seen a rapid growth in two new areas: life skills and game design. The work with life skills has been the result of a growing collaborative effort among the school librarians, special education teachers, and myself. Rather than focusing on specific curricular needs, the goal is to address more global skills that need reinforcement for students who receive services. So, instead of highlighting the curricular elements of the games, the emphasis is shifted to resources that incorporate gross
or fine motor skills, social skills including cooperative and team play, and problem solving. Part of the success here comes from the fact that many of the game resources are language independent, which means that the student’s inherent enthusiasm to play is not hindered by his or her reading ability. Instead, they can immerse themselves in the game experience, developing skills along the way.

The other area of expansion has been bringing tabletop game design into the classroom as a measure of student understanding and growth. Working together with the school librarian and classroom teacher, students are introduced to modern games as a framework from which they can construct their own games, incorporating concepts and skills being covered in the classroom. These experiences begin with introducing the students to a select set of games that contain elements that can be incorporated into their own designs. The resources serve as models and reference material for the students to go back to for inspiration during the design process. Midway through the project, the students meet with us to pitch their games, receiving feedback on both the integration of curriculum and the implementation of game design. In the end, as a product of their efforts, the students have created working games that are shared with, played with, and evaluated by the rest of the class.

There are several aspects that contribute to the success of tabletop game design as a project. The first is the format of the end product, which boils down to simple arts and crafts using paper, poster board, or index cards. Because students do not spend time learning how to interact with and use a digital game creation tool, they can then focus on ways in which curricular concepts and skills can be represented and interacted with in an engaging game space. The other factor is that students with different learning styles, working together in a group, complement and learn from each other, making for a better product.

For example, students could be working together in designing games for a mathematics class. Some students may be strong with the procedural elements of math but struggle with the creative application of the concepts. When partnered with students who take a more creative and less programmatic approach, together they bring a balance to their project and help each other see the value of both approaches. This, in the end, gives them an experience that more closely models team-based projects that they may encounter in the real world.

Whatever the game experience I bring to the classroom, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. The majority of students quickly find themselves engaged, responding to the authenticity and inherent fun of the experience. Struggling students find new ways to connect to concepts and skills that have been eluding them. Shy students begin to build confidence, learning to value and express their ideas. Teachers are refreshed by the enthusiasm and excited by the challenge the games present. In the
end, each of these experiences provides a powerful tool for educators to help students connect with learning in a meaningful and lasting way.

**Reference**

Teresa Copeland is the sole librarian at the Tesseract School in Phoenix, providing library services to students from age two to eighteen. She first encountered gaming in libraries as a teen-services librarian at the Yuma County Library District.

Brenda Henderson trained and worked as an architect before taking a career break to raise her family. After achieving further qualifications in graphic design and illustration, she returned to her first love of books and reading and took up a post as learning resources manager at a high school in Redditch, Worcestershire, UK. As well as board-gaming, her interests include graphic novels, Manga, and digital art.

Brian Mayer is a gaming and library technology specialist for the School Library System at the Genesee Valley Educational Partnership. At work, he has cultivated a game library of over two hundred tabletop titles that support state content standards, the American Association of School Librarians’ Standards for 21st-Century Learners, as well as the new Common Core. He works with classroom teachers, integrating game resources and the design process into the curriculum. Outside of work, Brian speaks nationally to librarians and teachers on the value of games in education. He is co-author of a book for the American Library Association entitled *Libraries Got Game* and has designed a board game centered around the abolitionist movement in the United States called *Freedom: The Underground Railroad*.

Scott Nicholson is an associate professor at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University and is the director of the Because Play Matters game lab (http://becauseplaymatters.com). His main research areas are meaningful gamification and the creation of transformative games for informal learning environments. He is the author of *Everyone Plays at the Library: Creating Great Gaming Experiences for All Ages* (2010) and the designer of the board game *Tulipmania 1637*. 