Foreword

PLAY! It’s serious business. It’s big business! Play is culture, play is art, play is education, play is community. Right? Humans value play, although mostly only for children and athletes. So why do video games, which can only be experienced through play, struggle to be taken seriously as culture, as art, as education, as community?

Mostly because adults are boring and dumb. Centuries of traditional, authoritarian education have cast such a long shadow that work and play are deeply-rooted antonyms for many grownups, and since learning must be work, it can never be play. Adult humans are the only creatures on earth that make a distinction between learning and play. We’re really, really wrong about this. As information retrieval becomes more ubiquitous, retention and rote learning lose their value relative to creativity and collaboration. For grownups to position play—the most natural form of learning—as somehow outside the legitimate worlds of education, art, culture, and community is not just boring and dumb, it’s positively harmful. We’re throwing away the most powerful learning tools we have at the moment when they are most needed, and why? Because Video Games are toys, and toys can’t be serious art, culture, or education?

Video games are unquestionably art, and for Generation X and younger, video games are likely the art form with which they had their most powerful art experience as kids. Players can actually engage with and experience video games in a way that linear media don’t allow. Beyond the mere projection of reading a novel or emotional connection of watching a show, players have agency in video games, and are responsible for their actions and their consequences in a way that novels, paintings, theater, music or movies cannot offer. Only a few remember the first painting they ever saw. Every player remembers the first starter Pokémon they ever trained.

Video games are unquestionably culture, but being as a medium younger than many people on Earth (a rare thing for a medium), they still have the whiff of the newfangled about them. It doesn’t help that if you look closely you can see the rages of adolescence still churning just beneath the surface. While this makes it a bit difficult for the academy to take a new medium seriously, movies and even comics had an easier time becoming the subject of humanities classes than video games have thus far. This is because of what might be called the adult player paradox: many academic types are unwilling to try video games because they don’t like the feeling of cluelessness that gamers are accustomed to working through. See also “play cannot be learning” above. Therefore, humanities departments are slow to embrace this burgeoning medium because they don’t understand them, and they can’t understand them because they’re unwilling to experience them directly through play. It’s tough to have a film symposium if you only look at stills from movies.

Video games are unquestionably education. They have to teach the player how to use them. They teach the player about new worlds and new ways of processing visual information. They engage the
learner in the active process of their education and can equitably provide feedback and opportunity. Video games can overcome achievement gaps and connect players who have no language in common. Most importantly for this moment, video games allow players to dive into and learn about complex systems, iterating towards mastery with little consequence of failure. That’s not an educational experience the classroom can offer.

Libraries, as selectors, maintainers, collectors and archivers of culture, are well-situated to push this envelope and help video games to be taken as seriously as other media that are only a little older. Hopefully this book will help to make the case as to why libraries should take games as seriously as they take other media, how games can fit into library science and practice, and why games are worthy of serious discussion and thought.

It’s not just a game; it’s play, and play is serious business.

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Eli Neiburger joined the staff of the Ann Arbor District Library as a helpdesk technician in 1997 and has been responsible for AADL’s technology program since 2000. He’s the author of GAMERS... in the LIBRARY?! published in 2007 by ALA Editions, and has spoken across the US, Europe, and Australia about gaming, libraries, publishing, and the web. He likes to arrange Nintendo music for his family brass band.