⬛ GAMES, GAMERS, & GAMING

Games and Literacy

By Liz Danforth

"Games and literacy? That's a stretch." So said a school librarian last year when I broached the American Library Association's (ALA) "Libraries, Literacy, and Gaming" initiative.

It's a surprisingly common sentiment. Many consider games faddish, despite their proven longevity: board-game playing goes back to the dawn of time, miniatures wargaming starts with H.G. Wells's *Little Wars* (1913), and console games have been around since the 1970s, the same time that role-playing games (RPGs) exploded. In the future, I expect, we won't be asking ourselves "What were we thinking?" so much as "Why all the fuss about gaming in libraries?"

Games and literacy—which I'll here define as the ability to read and write—go hand in hand. (Games and literature are actually old friends, but I'll save that for my next column, on storytelling.)

Reading inside/outside the game

At the very least, video game players need to be able to read well enough to set up a game and get it running. Even for a game like **RockBand**, they have to choose the player mode (single player, multiplayer) and be able to read the list of songs; while the songs load, they can read a short snippet about rock music history. A more elaborate example is the real-time strategy game **Warcraft III**, which features cinematics and "cut scenes," with text mirroring the dialog like subtitles.

Additionally, RPGs, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and tabletop games require players to read about the nature of their quests, assignments, or missions—to know what to look out for and where to go, to learn the characteristics of items in their inventory, and to discover tips on strategy. With such games, reading comprehension is a requirement for success.

Without stepping far outside the game, video game players have manuals and

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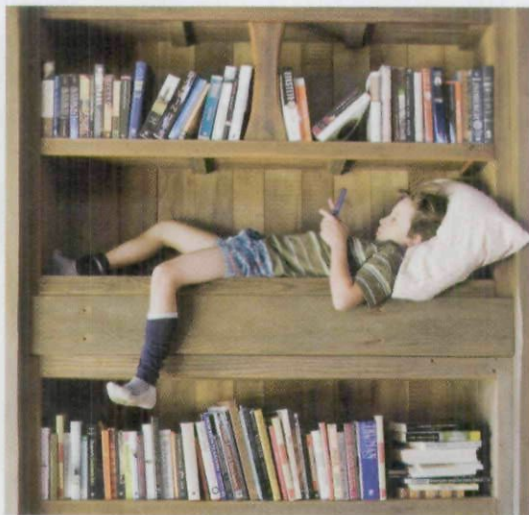
strategy guides, cheats, and walkthroughs. Manuals are often quite short and mean little until the player has spent time exploring the game to achieve contextualization. Strategy guides and walkthroughs, step-by-step descriptions of how to find and solve every element of a game, can be pretty dense reading, often single-spaced fine print going on for dozens of pages. After finishing a game, players might also use these guides to go back and see what they might have overlooked, or how a different story line might have unfolded.

Reading well beyond the game

People invested in gaming as their hobby spend a lot of time reading and writing about games, even games they're not presently playing. Games are reviewed in print and online; players weigh in about the relative merits of this game or that in community forums and discuss upcoming game releases with all the anticipatory fever they would a best-selling author's next release or a summer blockbuster.

There are countless blogs on games, too. They might be hosted by a top-

drawer panel of experts and scholars talking about virtual worlds (terranova.blogs.com), or they might be the cogitations of a 15-year-old playing **World of Warcraft** (wowkid. thestorythusfar.com).

It's the theorycrafting web sites that require most from players (e.g., elitistjerks.com or any of the game wikis at www. wikia.com/wiki/big_wikis). Theorycrafting refers to the in-depth analysis and hypothesizing of how to optimize one's game. One recent study (tinyurl.com/WoWstudy) broke down the threaded discussions on these theorycrafting sites and found that they follow the framework of systematic scientific methodological analysis. On these sites, people write thoughtfully at considerable length.

There are also forums in which players discuss the lore of a game, a character's latest achievements (sometimes as fictional diaries, e.g., www.pathofahero.com), why the game is or isn't balanced, and how the writer might propose to fix it. Some players even write as their gaming personas on sites like Twitter.

Not only is the ability to read such a discussion "literacy," but the discussion itself promotes structured critical thinking skills and written communication excellence. And it's being done in the name of fun, which cuts down the resistance and increases the motivation to push through a difficult passage, to hunt down the meaning of the word, to compare assertions and assess credibility. And aren't these the very approaches to learning our profession deems valuable? Don't doubt the worth of games to support literacy in all its manifestations.