

# What ALA Did in the Promotion of Game Service and What We Learned?

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**Abstract:** In the United States, library associations represented by American Library Association play a vital role in the overall development of the libraries. Especially, the successful and rapid promotion of game service significantly showed the diverse ability and great energy of library associations. In order to reverse the attitude of librarians towards games, library associations at all levels have made multiple efforts on practice, research and guidance. This paper analyzes the various efforts of American Library Association, including branches of ALA on the successful promotion of game service. We found that comparing with other library systems, the extraordinary organizational characteristics and working mechanism of American Library Association brought to this success on marketing new services and enhancing social influence.

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## 1 Introduction

According to the numbers provide by GameRT of American Library Association, over 1900 libraries from over thirty countries participated International Game Week (IGW) in November 2019<sup>[1]</sup>. International Game Week grew out of National Gaming Day@ your library (NGD). Comparing with NGD 2008, the number of participating libraries had tripled<sup>[2]</sup>. Meanwhile, we observed that in many large-sized public library, game became

definitely a normal service, including circulation of games and consoles, game events and game design workshop<sup>[3]</sup>. Their service covers young and old, men and women, in order to get strong connection with their community. For instance, the density of game activities provided to residents in the community can reach to 10 per week in Carnegie Library of Pittsburg in 2019. These facts tell us that nowadays, library providing game service are widely liked by the public and highly recognized by librarians. At the same time, the success of game service means that a significant number of librarians have the ability and consciousness to provide proper game services. These signs showed the maturity of the promotion of game services.

While such achievements of game services of library in US are inseparable from the guidance of ALA and the continuous efforts of members of GameRT. From the perspective of subjective efforts, they contributed the most for the success of game promotion. And in this paper, we would like to figure out what they did, what characteristics they showed and what kind of inspirations they brought to us.

The work on game started early back to the beginning of 20th century when ALA released the Standard Library Organization and Equipment for Secondary Schools of Different Sizes, in order to encourage the use of game activities to stimulate students' interest in reading, and embedding games in the classrooms of primary education<sup>[4]</sup>. However, the real power of games had not been noticed until the video game industry boomed in the 21st century and patrons' needs on game were rising day by day when time called for it. Many librarians and researchers observed this needs. Several public libraries

following the spirit of Melvil Dewey, the father of modern library, gave their first tries on providing video games events for patrons in 2003. These events were extremely welcomed by patrons. Meanwhile, inevitably, sound of the opposition came from both the public and librarians. In this case, ALA first pulled the trigger and took a series of decisive measures to ensure the promotion of game services.

## **2 ALA's efforts**

Facing the questions, hesitates and challenges from public and some of the librarians, ALA launched a series actions, including providing theory support, marketing support, instructions, examples and so on, in order to promote game services in the field. And all this started with the unification of internal opinions of librarians to motivate them to begin their game service.

### **2.1 Create a positive impression of game service for libraries and librarians**

#### **2.1.1 Call attention through debates to everse negative impression of game and raise the awareness of librarians**

In 2005, ALA noticed the different attitudes of librarian towards playing games in library, so they put forward an open topic on should the library provide game to patrons. ALA established electronic mailing lists Libgaming Google Group as a discussion board<sup>[5]</sup>. Librarians from all over US carried out relevant research and discussion on Library game service, the necessity and rationality of the library game service were discussed. And soon librarians reached a broad consensus on the positive value of Library game service. ALA shaped the opinions of librarians through this debate and had laid a good foundation for the nation-wide development of game service. The old thoughts of many librarians were changed preliminarily.

#### **2.1.2 Use all publicity channels discussed gaming&learning in library**

ALA released multiple articles and news about cases of gaming in library on ALA's publications and websites which open librarian's mind further. In 2006, 2008 and 2009, Levine Jenny published 3 articles about gaming in library on ALA's Library Technology Reports. In her articles, she quotes a lot of works of educationist of illustrate games benefits

literacy and shared many detailed cases of gaming in library to explain why gaming in the library and persuade librarians to start their first game event. In 2009, Nicholson, one of the initiator of game service published an article on Library Review. He stated that game is not a new service since numbers in his survey showed that 328 libraries in 400 were supporting games<sup>[6]</sup>. These actions continued for decades, meanwhile publishing of new books related to gaming in libraries were common in ALA's news pages. The author of these books include both individual researchers, for example "52 Ready-to-Use Gaming Programs for Libraries"<sup>[7]</sup>, and organizations of libraries such as "Games and Gamification Academic Libraries" written by ACRL<sup>[8]</sup>.

Also, on the blog The Shift Librarian, game was one of the hottest tag in 2007. Librarians are encouraged to upload their photos, videos, feelings and patrons' reflections of gaming events. All of these positive voices steadily showed ALA's supporting position and attitude towards game services which reinforced librarian's awareness of game services.

#### **2.1.3 Provide offline game activities at large conference**

Large scale conference has always been an important place for ALA to deliver new concept of game service to librarians. Besides inviting experts to make reports on those US nation-wide conference focus solely on gaming and libraries, for instance, the first one of them, Gaming, Learning, and Libraries Symposium hosted by ALA tec source and Association of College & Research Libraries in 2007, moreover, ALA catch every opportunity of large-scale conferences, including their own annual meetings, to host a variety of game activities to provide an immersive experience for librarians. From the big game California Dream which allowed participants to solve puzzles in teams were organized for librarians to socialize and to feel the increasing of engagement that game brought to participants, at 2008's ALA annual conference, the tradition lasted to 2019 and gradually became a regular program of GameRT at ALA annual conference. While in 2019, it was called ALAPlay and expands to several sessions. GameRT had a booth and Gaming Lounge on the exhibit floor and librarians could enjoy a free evening of gaming, learning and exploration. Librarians learned through their personal experience on these events,

and ALA recommended new type of games and game services<sup>[9]</sup>.

## **2.2 Improve the professional skills of librarians on game service**

Patrons of 21 century required the US libraries to provide game service, but when library realized this point, they found that the new service means the shortage of experienced librarians on game events. To meet this needs, ALA on the one hand, encouraged librarians interested in games to learn from the online exchange and inspiration between librarians, on the other hand, they also provide relevant courses and reference books for librarian to improve themselves.

### **2.2.1 Provide platform for librarians to discuss game service**

As a new service, except hesitation, the biggest obstacle of librarians and libraries cannot begin their service was inexperienced. So, communication needs on game were harsh at that time. With the arising of game service, ALA certified Games and Gaming Member Initiative Group in 2007 for helping the librarians who interested in game but have no experience. This Group was soon upgraded to Games and Gaming Round Table (GameRT) which “provides a venue for librarians interested in the use of games and gaming in libraries of all types a place to gather and share”<sup>[10]</sup>. Round table of ALA is a kind of membership group which charge dues and gather members of the same interests. The forming of GameRT was also a signature of the popularity of game services in the library of US.

### **2.2.2 New reference tools published for the library to begin game services**

In 2009, in order to solve the difficulties of libraries new to game services, ALA's Literacy Office, office for Literacy and Outreach Services, sponsored by Verizon, released "The Librarian's Guide to Gaming: An Online Toolkit for Building Gaming @ your library ", A free online website including a wide range of resources to help library create and evaluate various types of gaming services. The spreading of gaming in the whole US's public, school and academic libraries was accelerated.

### **2.2.3 Providing online instructions for librarians improving their game services**

Game nights and tournaments could be hosted by librarians with little knowledge of games, but those

game events couldn't meet more specific demands of patrons. ALA provide e-courses and live webinar lectures for beginners to improve their skills on gaming. Instructors could help librarians to get familiar with game design tools and processes when they develop their own game as teaching resources in their library<sup>[11]</sup>. Also, when librarians need to start a game-making program, they could find that since 2013, ALA never stop to provide online learning courses and continuously launched new iterations of the courses aiding many librarians provide services for young adults to lead children to tell their own stories, design games and develop their intelligence.

## **2.3 Give Strong Organizational support for game programs**

### **2.3.1 National Game Day—International Game Day—International Game Week**

Jenny Levine and Scott Nicholson initiated “Gaming@your Library” event on the Friday of National Library Week of ALA in 2008 to help people to recognize the benefits of gaming. This National Games Day had been a big success and became International Games Day in 2012, and International Games Week in 2017, with its brand's influence gradually improved. This activity is totally free, and the recent number of registered libraries was about one thousand to two thousand connecting tens of thousands participants from different continents<sup>[1]</sup>. The scale of the event can easily attract sponsors, and then ALA could provide free activity materials for the registered libraries and market on social media, and help the libraries to attract participants so that the library can re-connect with the community.

### **2.3.2 Connecting with Game Industry**

The scale and influence of ALA allowed them to bargain with large enterprises to obtain funding, game copies and other supports for libraries to start game services. In the early days of bringing games in libraries, ALA received one million dollars grants from Verizon Foundation to Study How Gaming Can Be Used to Improve Problem-Solving and Literacy. As a result, ALA developed their online toolkit "The Librarian's Guide to Gaming: An Online Toolkit for Building Gaming @ your library ". Their game events at ALA annual conferences were also supported by them.

With the wide-spreading potential of games

through library game services, top game manufacturers turned to pay attention to cooperation with ALA. We could name a dozen of them who went to ALA's annual conferences to looking for communicate with librarians face to face. They brought new demos to GameRT's Gaming Grove session to warm up their new game while give suggestions to librarians on how to start a game program in library. Some game companies sponsored International Game Week, by donating game copies or giving participants free access chances. This form enriched the experience of the International Game Week and had attracted more participants. At the same time, game manufacturers also took the opportunity to market their products to the world<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 2.3.3 Grants and free materials

Utilizing the huge influence among libraries, ALA provide awards and grants for game services to encourage libraries develop a game event or a game collection. For example in 2009, ten libraries were awarded mini-grants from ALA Verizon Foundation for them to test the toolkit and improve it from real practice lessons. And when pandemic of Covid-19 caused funding cuts of many libraries, GameRT provides grant program Game On! Grants 5 hundred dollars annually to those libraries which have the financial shortage problem of their game excellent program could apply<sup>[12]</sup>.

### 2.3.4 Others

In addition to what we mentioned above, there are other supports ALA provided. For example ALA offered free resources to access and free materials to download for game activities from 2008 to 2020. Especially on 2020's International Game Week, since the pandemic Covid-19, GameRT chose online games and free print&play games.

As well, ALA tried to lobby for library immunity in digital law and urge legislation in the relevant direction. These actions were strong driving forces to promote game services from both the macro and micro aspects.

## 3 What we learned?

In general, ALA has many highlighted actions in the promotion of game services. ALA provided game service guidance to librarians, emphasize studies on the types and characteristics of gaming&learning

thoroughly and gives full use of its advantages. For libraries and librarians, ALA also offered discussion platform, intelligence support, materials support, publicity support, financial support, legal support, etc. While for the public, around their core brand International Game Day/Week, ALA gathered people to game services. All these actions relied on its organizational structure and inherent influence.

Firstly, the flexible and efficient organizational structure of American Library Association is worth learning. ALA and some of its divisions, including American Association of School Librarians (AASL), Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), Association of College&Research Libraries (ACRL), Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) dedicated to the popularization of game service. These divisions are divided by type-of-library or type-of-library-function specialization. Besides, Offices and Round Tables, the branches of ALA, are more flexible to deal with new problems and challenges. This structure allows them to keep up with current events and respond quickly during the promotion of game services<sup>[13]</sup>.

During the promotion of controversial services, top-down model will be more persuasive. As ALA is more credible than individuals and enterprises, without the guidance of the association, it would take much more years for the whole field's librarians to change their ideas. The shortage of human resources and financial difficulties were partly solved by ALA, or else the practices of game service should have been waiting longer.

And in some degree, the wide spread of game service has objectively made up for digital gap. ALA and researchers seem games as a kind of tools to increase civic engagement and brought friendly interaction between among different social communities. Though there are also some problems for ALA, like consideration must be given to both the copyright protection and dissemination of high-quality games to maintain the benign interaction with the game industry, we could find the fact that the successful promotion of the game services had benefited libraries, public and game industry at the same time.

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