

by | Judith Snyder ●●●●



KEEP 'EM READING

PLAYING GAMES ... IN THE LIBRARY?

Games are gaining traction in school libraries as educators seek to engage children born in the technological age. Beyond their entertainment value, games can teach essential skills across the curriculum. Games involve critical reading or listening to discern rules. They may require quick strategic thinking, mathematical calculations, or the application of probability skills. Kids will be motivated by the game elements to learn both skills and content in order to improve their gameplay.

This article will help students and teachers explore components of games and their potential use for entertainment and higher-level skill development.

What's in a Game?

Grades 2–5

Divide students into small groups and have them brainstorm a list of all the games they know. Have them write the name of each game on an index card. In small groups or as a whole class, sort the games into categories. Identify the attributes that define each category. Display the results and ask students to

justify their categories. Let students study the class results and then invite them to write about their personal observations and interpretations of the data.

Choose two games familiar to all of the students, and ask each small group to identify the elements common to both (e.g., rules, goals, strategy, etc.). Compare the elements they identify with additional games to see whether the essentials hold across a larger sample. Let the class debate what makes games fun.

Games around the World

Grades 3–5

Put a little gameplay in your research by exploring favorite games of people in different countries. Let students choose a country from the resources available in your collection.

- **Browsing.** Spend the first part of the class introducing and practicing the art of browsing. Ask students to create a list of games played by people in the

chosen country. Discuss the use of a table of contents and index, and let students practice searching through print or online sources. Also review other parts of the text that can aid in browsing, such as headings, bold print, pictures, and captions. Then challenge students to find and list as many games as they can in the allotted time.

- **Question Development.** After students complete the browsing activity, encourage deeper interaction with the content. Ask students to think about the games they discovered and develop

A game has rules, goals, a bit of strategy, and interaction. It strives to be entertaining. It may include physical exertion and/or mental stimulation, and it can be played alone or involve cooperation or collaboration.

GRADES
K-5

questions they would like to answer about the games. What did students find that sparked their curiosity? What would they like to research further? Allow time to browse through the resources again to create this list of questions. Then have students choose one question from their list and find the answer.

- **Research and Application.**

Choose one game from the country and read the rules. Gather materials needed and play the game in a small group. Split up the groups to teach these new games to other students.

- **Class Evaluation and Questions for Discussion**

- *Do games help us understand different cultures? How?*
- *Can games unite the world? How?*
- *What makes a game fun?*

- **Optional Extension.** Search online for more information about games in other cultures. Create a chart of five games from different countries that have similarities to games played in the United States.

Ideas for Collaboration

As students explore the world of games, coordinate additional activities with classroom and special teachers.

Physical Education

- Have pairs of students choose a book from the library's collection that contains a previously unfamiliar game requiring an element of physical exercise. (These books can be collected ahead of time and placed at table groupings.) Encourage students to practice the game at recess. Discuss the importance of being able to explain the rules. After students have practiced their games, invite them to teach the game to others in the class.

- Individually or in small groups, write up rules for playground games so that all students can reference them when needed.
- Work in groups to create a new game that requires physical exercise and teach it to others during class.

Classroom Teachers

Collaborate with classroom teachers to introduce word games during wait times between classes. Make copies of the directions and distribute them to teachers for the appropriate grade level.

Word Play

Use the following as simple activities or organize into small-group games.

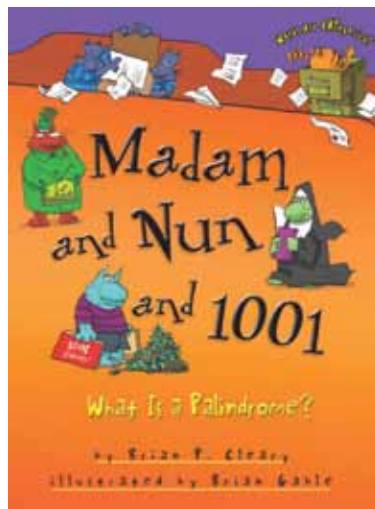
- The Hink Pink word game requires participants to create one-syllable word rhymes that answer a clue (e.g., clue: obese feline; answer: fat cat). The website <http://tinyurl.com/ot85m5y> has examples, as well as links to a rhyming dictionary, a thesaurus, and worksheets.
- Geography Letters can be played with or without maps. The objective is to name a place in the world using the last letter of the previous answer. For instance, if the first word is *Denver*, the next geographic place needs to begin with an *R*. If a player repeats a

place-name or cannot think of one, he or she is out. Play continues until only one player remains.

- Read the book *C D B!* by William Steig. Let students work together to create sentences using letters that stand for the whole word (e.g., *C = see, D = the, B = bee*).
- Read *Wumbers* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal. In this book, numbers take the place of some letter combinations (e.g., *2t, w8ing, 4ever*). Challenge students to create additional words using letter-and-number combinations. Add them to a class chart for others to decipher, or use the words in fun sentences. Intermediate students can use dictionaries to locate appropriate words.
- *Palindromes* are words, phrases, or sentences that are spelled the same forward and backward (e.g., *mom; Was it a rat I saw?*) Read aloud part or all of a book that uses palindromes, such as *Palindromania!* by Jon Agee or *Madam and Nun and 1001: What Is a Palindrome?* by Brian P. Cleary. After reading and sharing favorites, give students time to play with words to develop their own palindromes. These may take time to develop, so post a chart in the hallway where students can write their ideas after class concludes. Offer a reward for the person who contributes the most palindromes, the longest palindrome, and so forth.

Technology

Assess resources to determine the best video or computer games to purchase. Collaborate to create a venue where these and other digital games can be highlighted. Consider setting up a gaming club or a competition. Other ideas can be found in the books mentioned in the next section.



Computer/ Video Games

Do video games have a place in the library or classroom? They do, according to Marc Prensky, author of *Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning!* Prensky notes that to win complex games, "kids must learn, through complicated reasoning, to create strategies for overcoming obstacles and being successful—skills that are immediately generalizable." He further says that video games teach kids how to

- discern important information when confronted with many stimuli,
- deduce the rules of the game from observations,
- experiment and analyze results,
- apply results to future situations,
- gather information from many sources,
- make good decisions quickly, using parallel processing (successful multitasking), and
- collaborate with others.

Eli Neiburger, author of *Gamers ... in the Library?!*, observes that most video games require large amounts of reading, including browsing FAQs, fan blogs, and other texts for playing hints. He writes that video games provide a "new kind of literacy that involves information processing, pattern recognition, multi-tasking, physical coordination, and other cognitive skills that will be valuable in the future." Moreover, according to Neiburger, rapid decision making throughout the game gives kids a sense of power in their lives, which can develop resilience and persistence. Children often have a higher tolerance for frustrations when they know they are the ones who made the decision.

Games can also provide a context or situation that conveys ethical, moral, and values-based lessons. Teachers and parents can use these games as an opportunity for dialogue with children. For example, many online games are

played within a community of users, and players can decide whether to attempt an obstacle alone or work with others to achieve a common goal. As a result, players learn about the importance of developing cooperative and collaborative relationships.

Invite students with experience playing cooperative video games to reflect on and discuss the impact of their decision making during gameplay on their everyday decision making. Ask how they learn from mistakes as well as successes. Then ask these students to apply what they have learned about decision making to the actions of characters in literature they read.

Note: Before allowing children to play online games, parents and teachers should discuss the importance of not sharing personal information in online forums.

The books by Prensky and Neiburger are great resources for teachers and parents. Check the back section of each book for detailed resources and video games for learning specific skills. Additional ideas can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/pax9tf9>.

Game Design

Grades 4–5

Older students may enjoy the challenge of creating, testing, revising, and prototyping a board game of their own design. The game-development process is similar to both the writing process and the scientific process. The book *Game Design* by Greg Austic is an excellent reference for lesson planning and student use.

Begin by identifying the differences between a game and an activity, as well as the essential elements of games. Then discuss how and why games create specific emotions and why that might be important.

Share parts of the chapter titled "The Mind of a Designer" with the whole class, including sections about learning from failures, thinking critically about games played, developing a team that will work well together, learning to love criticism, and taking notes.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a road map for student game development, including finding inspiration, refining ideas, prototyping, and testing the game to get feedback.

After students have completed their game design, have them write a paragraph comparing the process for developing a game to the writing process or the scientific process. You also may want to consider making games an end product for future research projects.

With all video games, it is important to stress moderation. A video from Boy's Town Center for Behavioral Health (<http://tinyurl.com/po2wkdd>) shares results from studies on the appropriate length of screen time and the importance of adult supervision.

Because of the many education standards students must achieve, you may need to justify the purchase and use of games as part of the curriculum. Remember, however, that the role of the library is not only to inform but also to entertain. Games have the ability to do both.

Judith Snyder is a seasoned teacher/librarian in Colorado, as well as a professional storyteller and freelance writer. Judith is the author of the *Jump-start Your Library* series, three books featuring hands-on library lessons from *UpstartBooks* (2008), and a picture book, *What Do You See?* (2009), from *Odyssey Books*.