

# VIDEOGAMES, LIBRARIES, AND THE FEEDBACK LOOP



LEARNING BEYOND  
THE STACKS

SANDRA SCHAMROTH ABRAMS  
HANNAH R. GERBER

# **Videogames, Libraries, and the Feedback Loop**



Praise for *Videogames, Libraries, and the Feedback Loop*

Abrams and Gerber masterfully illustrate it is no longer a question of whether gaming-driven learning practices *should* be included in literacy learning spaces such as libraries, but rather *what's taking us so long* to provide these opportunities to all youth. The Feedback Loop Framework and the multi-iterative ways learners evaluate and reflect on their own learning experiences has tremendous implications not only for the fields of gaming and libraries, but also the very ways we consider youth meaning making in traditional learning spaces. The youth will show us the way, they always do; we just need to be prepared to trust and follow. Abrams and Gerber show us how.

—**Shelbie Witte**, Ph.D., Kim and Chuck Watson Endowed Chair in Education, Oklahoma State University, USA, author of *Text to Epitext: Expanding Students' Comprehension, Engagement, and Media Literacy*

*Videogames, Libraries, and the Feedback Loop*, by Sandra Schamroth Abrams and Hannah Gerber, is an extremely useful and revelatory read that describes how libraries and librarians can foster learning and discovery through videogame play. It's useful in the sense that librarians and, actually, educators, in general, can take lessons learned from the authors' examination of what sorts of learning and meaning making come from the use of videogames in supported learning spaces. Central to how the learning is examined is this concept of the feedback loop—a set of real-time indicators and signifiers that players interact with that helps them understand their place in a game and make strategic decisions on how to proceed. Chapter 2, which covers the feedback loop is crucial reading for anyone designing learning spaces that focus on iterative and interest-driven experiences (aka the I<sup>2</sup> approach covered in Chapter 5). Indeed, the book and the feedback loop lens are a revelation for me (an instructional game designer turned professor) as I think about engaging course design and my role as a co-learner/explorer with my students in a higher education environment that was forced to shift to online instruction! This detailed account of how learners engage with videogames with collaborative support is very timely and I cannot recommend this book enough.

—**Mark Danger Chen**, Ph.D., Lecturer, Interactive Media Design, University of Washington Bothell, USA, author of *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft*.

Drs. Sandra Abrams and Hannah Gerber provided a detailed look at implementing videogames programming in libraries. Drs. Abrams and Gerber bring extensive experience in research on videogames and youth. This book offers insights to both researchers and practitioners for how to implement a videogame program but also what those programs can provide to youth who are participating, beyond just playing a videogame. The framework of a feedback loop that Drs. Abrams and Gerber present, although a well-known concept within videogames, provides those offering videogame programming in libraries a much needed way to assess their programs and determine success. Whether you are offering your first videogame program or you are a seasoned pro, this book offers new insights for everyone.

—**Crystle Martin**, Ph.D., Director of Library and Learning Resources, El Camino College, California, USA, author of *Voyage across a Constellation of Information: Information Literacy in Interest-Driven Learning Communities*.

# **Videogames, Libraries, and the Feedback Loop: Learning Beyond the Stacks**

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my family, who help me explore limitless learning – *Sandra*

To my nephews, who show me that life is an ever-expanding  
universe of play – *Hannah*

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# Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
ESRB	Entertainment Software Ratings Board
GPS	Global Positioning System
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MMOG	Massively Multiplayer Online Game
MOBA	Multiplayer Online Battle Arena
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPC	Nonplayable Character

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## About the Authors

**Sandra Schamroth Abrams**, PhD, is Professor of Adolescent Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at St. John's University in New York. Abrams's investigations of digital literacies, videogaming, and technology integration explore layered meaning making and agentic learning. As she focuses on the intersection of digital and nondigital literacies, what comes to the fore is the powerful meaning making that exists in, across, and through the blurred boundaries of these spaces. Her work has been featured in leading research journals, including *Teachers College Record*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *Language & Linguistics*, and *Educational Media International*. She is the author of *Integrating Virtual and Traditional Learning in 6-12 Classrooms: A Layered Literacies Approach to Multimodal Meaning Making* (Routledge), co-author of *Conducting Qualitative Research of Learning in Online Spaces* (SAGE), *Managing Educational Technology: School Partnerships and Technology Integration* (Routledge), and *Writing in Education: The Art of Writing for Educators* (Brill). She is the co-editor of *Bridging Literacies with Videogames* (Sense/Brill) and *Child-Parent Research Reimagined* (Brill). Abrams is the recipient of the 2019 USDLA Distance Learning Quality Paper Award for the article, *Gamification and Accessibility*. Abrams was a finalist for the AACTE Outstanding Book award for *Integrating Virtual and Traditional Learning in 6-12 Classrooms: A Layered Literacies Approach to Multimodal Meaning Making* (Routledge), and she received an AECT journal article award for her research on peer review and power structures in online spaces. Abrams's work also has been featured in mainstream media, such as *Edutopia*, *The New York Times*, *Tech Times*, *Parents Magazine*, and *THE Journal*. Furthermore, Abrams has served as a Technology Consultant and Assessment Coordinator for a number of projects, including a New York City Department of Education Award: Learning and Technology Grant. From 2018 to 2020, Abrams was the Program Chair for the American Educational Research Association's Media, Culture, and Learning special interest group. Abrams serves on a number of journal editorial boards and is an Associate Editor for the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* and a founding co-editor of the Gaming Ecologies and Pedagogies book series (Brill).

**Hannah R. Gerber**, PhD, is Professor of Literacy at Sam Houston State University and an Honorary Professor in the Department of Language Education, Arts, and Culture at the University of South Africa. She is the President

of the International Council for Educational Media, one of the oldest organizations in the world dedicated to educational media (circa 1950). A former high school English teacher, Gerber's research focuses on youth culture and digital practices, particularly adolescent videogaming practices and the literacy experiences that are developed within. Gerber's work has won multiple research awards; recently, she was awarded the "Divergent Award for Excellence in 21st Century Literacies Research" (2016) an award given to "recognize the indelible contributions of educators and scholars who have dedicated their careers to the theoretical and practical study of 21st century literacies." Additionally, she is a two-time recipient of the Sam Houston State University College of Education Faculty Excellence in Research Award (2014 and 2020). Gerber has given over a dozen keynote addresses at national and international conferences across five continents. Furthermore, her research has been discussed in mainstream media venues, such as *Wired Magazine*. With more than 80 published works to date, she has co-authored five books including most recently, *Conducting Qualitative Research of Learning in Online Spaces* (Sage). Her most recent research can be found in top peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Tech Trends*, *The Qualitative Report*, *Educational Media International* and *English Journal*. She is an Associate Editor for the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* and a founding co-editor of the Gaming Ecologies and Pedagogies book series (Brill). She is passionate about mentoring new academics and burgeoning scholars in the field of digital literacy and she enjoys engaging doctoral students in critical and creative inquiry that will further the field of digital literacies and digital methods.



# Preface

Does your library have videogame programming? Would you like it to have one? What if you learned that the principles of feedback in videogaming could strengthen youth programming at your library?

*Videogames, Libraries and the Feedback Loop: Learning Beyond the Stacks* is a resource for anyone interested in offering, supporting, refining, and/or simply expanding understandings of library-based events and programming designed specifically with youth videogame play in mind. This book stems from our own interests in and research of videogaming and learning, which helped us to develop our understanding of *the feedback loop*, or the ways players receive information so they can manage their own learning and actions. As education researchers who have spent a great deal of time in public libraries observing and examining videogame play, youth interaction, and library youth programming, as well as observing countless youth taking part in videogaming activities in a variety of out-of-school spaces – from homes to community spaces – we perceive the undeniable value of such interaction and agency that videogaming affords. We build upon these noticings of youth participation and decision making as we write this book and, knowing that videogames and technology can and will change, we integrate examples of current and vintage games to demonstrate our points and ideas to a range of audiences.

Throughout this text, the word, videogames, is singular because we agree with the *The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual's* call for greater accuracy and consistency when using the term (Thomas, Orland, & Steinberg, 2007). Orland (2007) suggested that the evolution of the two words into a “one-word cultural idiom” (p. 6) can be indicative of the evolution of the field, underscoring that “a one-word option denotes an established concept, whereas two words simply reference parts of a whole” (Abrams, Merchant, & Rowsell, 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, although we note our observations of nondigital gaming inside and outside the library spaces we visited, we use the terms “videogaming” and “gaming” interchangeably. Whenever we specifically discuss nondigital gaming, we identify it as such.

Because this book is an extension of our previous work on authentic meaning-making experiences that occur within videogame environments, we recognize the multiplicitous and multidimensional ways that one can make meaning in, around, and across videogame spaces. We acknowledge and honor the fact that no two learning experiences are the same, and we advocate for library programming that builds upon youth input and responds to youth needs, even when social

distancing complicates traditional gaming setups; this includes, but is not limited to, rethinking and extending library-based videogame networks, thereby enabling youth to play videogames together in and beyond the brick-and-mortar library space. Additionally, this ethos informs a typology we have developed based on our research in and around library videogame environments. We call for collaboration between youth and librarians that stems from, what we call, an I<sup>2</sup> (iterative and interest-driven) approach that can innovate and refine new and existing library videogame programming.

The examples offered in this book are just that – examples of how gaming and learning work in tandem through an iterative process that we call the feedback loop. The ideas offered in this book are meant to be tweaked, modified, adapted, and changed to fit one's own unique situation. Additionally, we place technical terminology in bold and provide a glossary for those words. We recognize that meaning making within and around videogames is diverse, nuanced, and personalized, and we offer research-based, practical ideas to librarians as they embrace and/or integrate youth videogame programming at their libraries.

# Foreword: Community

*Teri S. Lesesne*

It is never easy to be the youngest in the family. Our youngest granddaughter had to wait two years to get her own library card. Even though she had access to books at home and school, even though we would buy her books when she asked, there was something more significant about having her own card, the card that gave her membership in what Frank Smith terms “the literacy club” (Smith, 1987). So, on the morning of her fifth birthday, we drove to the library to obtain that entry card. We have a photo of her standing in the stacks clutching the simple plastic card with her name printed on it (they let her print her name, too!). She is not surrounded by presents or cake or family and friends. Books surround her, and the expression on her face tells it all: she has found her community.

Community is the word that kept appearing in my notes as I read this remarkable book. Smith called it a “club,” but the public library takes that club and extends it into a community by combining many different aspects of literacy, many different members of the club, and many elements of the larger community served by the library. Make no mistake; the library is a community within a larger community. Think about how libraries become more than book repositories, especially during some of the darker moments in their neighborhoods. They become a place of light and safety when communities are devastated by disasters; they become a haven for people who have been displaced by tragedies. Everyone is welcome.

The inclusion of videogaming in the public library is one more example of how libraries create and support and encourage communities within their buildings and even in virtual spaces outside of the brick and mortar. These spaces are not just an area set Aside. They are not maker spaces. They include more than an area of space; they consider the needs of the community regarding placement (put the videogaming area in the children’s section and perhaps lose members who do not wish to be identified as “kids”). The area is not just measurement. How should the design of the space be constructed to achieve the ultimate goal: redefining and supporting new literacies? How can all this extend beyond the building to the larger world of the Literacy Club? Abrams and Gerber explore these questions and dimensions in a book that should be required reading for those seeking to become youth librarians, to those seeking to work with teens and tweens and technology, and with those teachers seeking to create a community of learners who explore many different modalities.

Practical and, yet, grounded in pedagogy, research-based and, yet, totally accessible by all readers, this book joins those early books on literacy such as the aforementioned *The Literacy Club* by Frank Smith. It will join other titles about spaces, about services, and about honoring service to tweens and teens. It belongs on that critical 5 ft. professional shelf alongside the 16 years of accumulated wisdom contained within those books.

A final note, our youngest granddaughter has a new library card. She now belongs to the public library in her new residential neighborhood. Her community is different, but the reasons to belong, to be a part of it, remain the same. How many of us could reach into our pockets and wallets right now and pull out that valuable membership card?

August 2020  
Conroe, Texas

## **Reference**

Smith, F. (1987). *Joining the literacy club: Further essays into education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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