

Empowering & Innovating Games-based Library Services: National Best Practices for Gaming Collections & Programming

INTRODUCTION: The Wisconsin State Library and Washington State Library (among other prospective partners) propose *Empowering & Innovating Games-based Library Services: National Best Practices for Gaming Collections & Programming*, a National Leadership project in support of Goal 2: Build the capacity of libraries and archives to improve community well-being and strengthen civic engagement, and Objective 2.1: Develop or enhance replicable programming, models, and tools that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the course of this three-year, \$249,500 implementation project, partners will convene subject matter experts to collect, create, curate, and make accessible to nationwide libraries a suite of diverse resources and research-informed best practices related to the implementation of multi-format games in libraries, youth centers, and other justice-facing youth detention centers. The outcome would be a readily replicable programming and collection development toolkit for other state libraries, and library systems/library consortia to deploy on a scalable level; additionally, the toolkit will include research documentation that highlights the intrinsic social/emotional, learning, accessibility, equity, and literacy benefits of integrating interactive media in library spaces to advance knowledge and understanding with a direct benefit to communities nationwide.

PROJECT WORK PLAN: The three-year project, beginning on August 1st, 2024, has three primary phases. Project personnel from Washington will include Sara Jones, Washington State Librarian and PI for the project, Sara White (WA Youth Services Consultant), Mike Buschman (WA Library Development Manager), and Adam Davis, [Game to Grow](#). Wisconsin personnel will include Ben Miller (WI Library Services Team Director), Chris Baker (WI Public Library Consultant), and partners from the [Wisconsin Center for Education Research/Field Day Learning Games](#).

Phase 1 – Research/Literature Review & Dissemination (August 2024-September 2025): During the first year, Project Leaders will contract with the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s [Wisconsin Center for Education Research \(WCER\)](#) to surface existing literature applicable to games, learning, and their connection to libraries. Utilizing that literature, Project Leaders and WCER will embark upon the development of new research and data collection related to gaming collections and programs in libraries that will ultimately result in a final report with recommendations for best practices of implementing games in library spaces. This report will be disseminated to the national library community through the [Chief Officers of State Library Agencies \(COSLA\)](#), [ALA Games & Gaming Roundtable \(ALA GameRT\)](#), and through [Wisconsin](#) and [Washington State Libraries](#)’ websites, and state and regional library associations.

Phase 2 – Pilot Testing, Workshopping, Partner Programming (August 2025-November 2026): The second phase will see the activation of project-related partnerships with WCER, Game to Grow, [Wizards of the Coast](#), COSLA, ALA GameRT, and others, to pilot resources, facilitate collaborative programming, and engage in research/practitioner initiatives related to games-based library services. Partners will continue collecting games-based library services data to develop a more concentrated and accessible picture of the ‘current state of gaming in libraries.

Phase 3 – Analysis & Documentation/Resource Curation & Dissemination (November 2026-November 2027): During the final phase, partners will collectively analyze the resources collected in phase 1, and the work done in phase 2, resulting in the development of supplemental reporting documentation and a digital games-based library services toolkit -- to be disseminated nationally through the partners. Final documentation will include the creation of a sustainability model which will allow scalable adoption of viable best practices.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION: Many libraries throughout the country recognize the popularity and interest games hold with their users and already utilize gaming in some form in their programs and collections. Modern gaming (in numerous formats and combinations: video games, board games, tabletop role-playing games, collectable/competitive card games, virtual reality, youth Esports, etc.) continues to be one of the most popular pastimes in America, and shows no signs of slowing down; in 2021, well-known games publisher Wizards of the Coast (based in Washington state) boasted that their legacy tabletop-roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons* (created in Wisconsin) had achieved more than 50 million players to date, and 33% year-over-year increases globally, while the overall board game industry was expected to grow 7% to 11% between 2022-2027 ([Corliss, 2021](#); [Peiser, 2022](#)).

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On the virtual side of things, the data aggregating video game trade association Entertainment Software Association recently reported in their *2023 Essential Facts About the U.S. Video Game Industry* that an estimated 212.6 million Americans play video games at least one hour a week, which equates to 65% of the country ([ESA, 2023](#)).

Libraries are uniquely positioned to spearhead this initiative since library gaming programs (including tabletop games, video games, competitive card games, and more) rely on face-to-face interaction and cooperation. Not only are libraries geographically widespread and free to access, but they can furnish users with the tools necessary for learning rules, strategies, and game lore in a collaborative setting. Libraries continually strive to identify new ways of remaining innovative and culturally significant in the eyes of their users; given the ever-evolving popularity of games and gaming, integrating games-based library services (either in the form of programming or gaming collections) into library operations offers leaders in the field extraordinary pathways to strengthen interest-rich relationships with patrons, and likely reach potentially untapped demographics. Beyond popularity alone, research into gaming across a wide spectrum of learning, literacy, and mental health sciences have concluded there to be extraordinarily efficient and deeply impactful learning and social/emotional benefits relative to the medium ([ALA GameRT](#); Gee, [2007](#) & [2013](#)). There are robust opportunities to collect, evaluate, and disseminate this research to encourage libraries to integrate gaming into their services. There is also the likelihood of further investigating the social emotional benefits of gaming when *specifically* embedded in a library space or service, truly identifying the value of their role from a community-based capacity.

Ultimately, this work would result in a sustainable, replicable, and scalable ‘games-based library services’ toolkit for states to implement, and a new network of researchers and practitioners collectively activated around a ‘games + libraries + learning’ affinity space. The Washington State Library and Wisconsin State Library are uniquely suited to be national leaders in this space; WA Library has an existent, strong, and collaborative relationship with the game publisher (Wizards of the Coast) Washington is deploying a statewide grant program in 2024 funded by both state and LSTA sources to provide a foundation for the toolkit and a Community of Practice for national replicability. WI Library is engaged in an active research/practitioner relationship via multiple games-based/playful learning projects with researchers/game developers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (e.g., the Field Day Lab).

DIVERSITY PLAN: Gaming as a medium, being inherently multi-modal and interactive, enables unique opportunities for wide-ranging, accessible programming in libraries, spanning all ages, while being inclusive of neurodivergent individuals and people with disabilities. The demographics of gamers tend to be wide-ranging and consisting of people of all identities and backgrounds; games-based library services directly encourage the communing of people with a shared interest in a library space, which will foster collaboration and discourse within communities.

PROJECT RESULTS: This project will result in the development of an easily accessible and sustainable digital toolkit, which will offer readily replicable gaming programs and games-based collection development practices (rooted in accessibility and equity), supported by modern research highlighting the intrinsic social-emotional learning (SEL) & learning science benefits of interactive media. Additionally, the project will result in the tempering of a stronger national network of games-informed library leaders, while seeking to investigate new modalities in the games/libraries space. This will be accomplished largely by cultivating research/practitioner partnerships, collecting games-based library services data, surveying the field, templating the development of statewide games-based cohorts, and convening library workers and partners in a community of practice. The current WA Library work will start the community of practice model and give the foundation for national one connected through state libraries, consortium, and library associations. The WA Library commits to maintain the online component to sustain the project during development and for future sustainability.

BUDGET SUMMARY: The total project is estimated at \$249,500, including subawards/contracts for consultant services (\$174,500), travel/convening of partners/the development of a collaborative platform (\$75,000), and 4% indirect costs (\$9,980).