Playing in Limbo: Using Liminal Space to Promote Library Services & Writing Center

Ruth Monnier, Lora Winters

Pittsburg State University

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

University libraries are stereotyped as a quiet space for studying and reading in the stacks, but they can be a vibrant hub for learning and play, especially when they contain writing centers, tutoring programs, and other support structures for students. At our university, the writing center and student success office are housed in the main library location. Efforts are made by these offices to engage students, who regularly use the library to study, with their services. Due to the physical boundaries and location within the library, students seem to intentionally come to the physical location to utilize only one of the services, either the writing center, tutoring, or the library's physical space and resources. We have tried to add playful elements to the liminal space between the library and the writing center's boundaries by using a variety of attention-grabbing activities to encourage students to engage with both services and support their own well-being. While these activities generate some level of engagement, some work better than others because the activity encourages participation between students, writing center staff, and library staff. Creating elements of play with liminal space and within the library contributes to keeping the atmosphere of the library vibrant, social, and engaging.

In higher education, libraries and writing centers serve different but intersecting functions with respect to student learning. Locating the writing center within the library space creates unique opportunities for collaboration in creating new learning experiences for students. These opportunities are exciting for writing center and library faculty, but they aren't automatically engaging for students, especially for students returning to a physical campus after a semester or more of remote learning. Moreover, institutional budget pressures resulting from falling enrollment in higher education, along with shifts toward increasing online enrollment, create pressure for campus support operations to justify their existence in physical space and require them to be more innovative in finding ways to increase student presence in their physical locations.

Our physical location is at Pittsburg State University (PSU), a master's granting, regional state university with an enrollment of just over 6,000 students located in a city of 22,000 people in Southeast Kansas, 100 miles from the nearest major metropolitan area. The university library, at the heart of the main campus, has recently completed a multi-year renovation project with the construction of a spacious, centrally located writing center on the main

floor of the library. This includes modern teaching and collaboration spaces in the basement and an open plan coffee shop, Axe Grind, on the first floor. The construction was in its final phases just in time for the campuswide lockdown and shift to remote learning in 2020. The result in fall 2021 was a space designed to meet the needs of the bustling campus community of 2012, with its record enrollment of 7,200 students and almost exclusively face-to-face course delivery. The return in 2021 was at a time when college enrollment had declined both locally and statewide, online course delivery had increased exponentially, and only our rising seniors had any significant experience of pre-pandemic college life. For both the library and the writing center, our primary service functions had continued online largely without interruption, but our challenge for 2021-2022 was to figure out how to repopulate the physical spaces.

At the same time, new ways of thinking about what academic "third spaces" can do have made us more aware of the potential for liminal spaces in the library and writing center to function as sites of unscripted and creative activity: in other words, play. This article describes how play can occur in liminal spaces, explains how we have used play to promote engagement with the physical spaces in our library and writing center, reports patrons' experiences engaging in playful activities, and argues for the value of play in creating productive relationships between students, campus learning spaces, and the instructional services those spaces provide.

Literature Review

Writing Centers as Liminal Spaces

A liminal space is, literally, a threshold. Leaning heavily on the idea of liminality first associated by van Gennep (1960 with rites of passage in human experience, a liminal space can be understood as a place of possibility, the function of which, being undefined (that is, neither in nor out, neither one thing nor another), can be seen has having infinite potential. The definition of liminal space that best applies to our work is from the book *The spaces of organisation & the organisation of space: Power, identity, and materiality at work:*

> Liminal spaces are where different human worlds meet and to a greater or lesser extent overlap; and in this meeting they create new opportunities for difference. Border areas in the horizontal plane are clear examples of this. Humans in liminal spaces tend to meet other humans whose culture they do not fully share. Organizationally, the fluidity of boundaries is notable. (Dale & Burrell, 2008, p. 234)

Writing centers themselves are liminal spaces. The mission of a writing center is to help students become better at writing, so in that sense they are instructional spaces, but what they offer is a form of customer service. The writing center is a safe space, without grades or judgment, and yet for writers, to come to the writing center can feel like an act of radical vulnerability and risk-taking. A writer's visit to the writing center is usually motivated by the needs of the moment, but writing center faculty often see ourselves as playing a long game in which we exchange immediate help with a specific document for an opportunity to teach the writer something they can carry with them into future writing situations. Writing centers are, and have always been, complicated, ambiguous spaces.

In *Moveable feasts, liminal spaces: Writing centers in the state of in-betweenness*, Bonnie S. Sunstein (1998) says of liminal spaces, 'Because of their ambiguous, inconsistent quality—because they are spaces in which people take risks—liminal places can feel dangerous' (p. 14). Historically, universities have dealt with the dangerous ambiguity of writing centers by locating them on the margins of campuses—in basements and in closets, in disused computer labs and in retired classrooms. Stephen North (1984) addressed this in *The idea of a writing center* when he described the origins of writing centers as 'the castoff, windowless classroom (or in some cases literally, closet) the battered desks, the old textbooks, a phone (maybe), no budget, and, almost inevitably, a director with limited status' (p. 437). The robust discipline of writing center studies that emerged from these marginal and marginalized origins is a testament to the writing center directors, faculty, and student tutors who recognized the margins as a place of infinite potential where absence of institutional regard became an opportunity for creative self-invention. While many writing centers, including ours, have been moved out of the margins of the university and into new homes in the library or student learning center, writing centers are still, conceptually, liminal spaces. Their work is shaped on one hand by a shared disciplinary vision of what constitutes "writing center work," and is grounded on the other hand in an institutional budget that carries with it certain expectations, but ultimately, responsibility for deciding what an individual writing center is and does falls to the individual faculty, student employees, and writing center patrons whose day-to-day interactions continually create and recreate the writing center on their campus.

When writing centers are physically located in flexible academic spaces like our newly redesigned library, that come with fewer preconceptions about the types of activities that are possible within those spaces, opportunities arise for collaboration where even more kinds of learning can happen and thrive. To help students reengage with the on-campus experience, we explicitly sought to utilize undefined spaces within the library and the writing center to nurture the learner in our students by promoting play for relaxation and mental stimulation, but also to promote social interaction and enjoyment, in order to nurture the human being in our learners. We hoped that creating these positive experiences would forge a connection between our students and the space itself that would make the library their campus home-away-from-home because no matter how excellent the services we offer, students can't benefit from them if they don't know we exist. In this context, however, Sunstein's (1998) point that liminal spaces can feel dangerous was increasingly relevant, especially as we imagined new ways to promote student engagement with the library and the writing center. Liminal spaces are defined by uncertainty and by an absence of explicitly identifiable markers to indicate the nature of the space and the expectations for how to engage with it, and this is especially true of spaces like academic libraries and writing centers. These are spaces that are explicitly designed around a customer service modality yet are driven by an instructional mission and vision; they are physically organized to invite connection, collaboration, interaction, and movement in physical space, but their ultimate goal is the development of the individual intellect. They are neither classrooms nor precisely social spaces, and we had found that students already experienced some uncertainty and hesitancy about how to engage with them, even before the radical transformation of the student on-campus experience.

Play and Learning

Creating experiences assists individuals in remembering and contextualizing knowledge. Games, particularly those used for teaching concepts, create a deeper understanding due to the multiple associations from actions, images, and more; this helps build problem-solving skills (Gee, 2017). Play assists in the development and education of a person as it relates to creativity, social interaction, project-based learning, moral concerns, and cognitive development among others (Henricks, 2020, p. 137). Educators have utilized play-based learning to develop and improve skills in mathematics, reading, science, language, and writing (Amorim et al, 2020; Batt, 2010; Forsyth, 2012; Ramani & Eason, 2015). Play and learning, particularly the relationship between play and literacy, appears to be linked and therefore relevant for both adults and younger individuals, but it has been a struggle to prove this idea due to lack of funding for research (Roskos & Christie, 2013; Walsh, 2020). Additionally, the majority of research on play and learning is focused on children. Kanhadilok and Watts (2014) state that as of the publication of their article, only about 40 research papers in the field of psychology had been published about play in adults, compared to 3000 about play in children. Some of the research that has been done in this area has established that play in adulthood can increase happiness, change pathways in the brain, and decrease stress (Gordon, 2014). Whitton's work with students in Higher Education is a notable exception (2018). Whitton (2018) notes:

> The forms and mechanisms of play in childhood and adulthood may be broadly similar, but adult play is fundamentally different from children's play because of the assumptions and values that adults bring to its practice, the perceived acceptability of various forms of play and the ways in which players are judged by others (2018).

Even though play and considerations for playing are different for adults compared to children, play still provides benefits for adults.

Play in Writing Centers

While early writing centers, as described for example by Carino (1995/2008), and Boquet (1999/2008), must have been rather grim places for the students relegated to them, a remarkable spirit of play emerged from that unlikely root. In *Then everybody jumped for joy! (But Joy didn't like it, so she left)*, for example, Scott Miller (2008) notes that 'the argument that the WC should be a space for play is one that has come to be made fairly commonly in important WC-related publications' (p. 23). Similarly, Chad Verbais (2008) describes using play as 'a component of the writing process' (p. 137) and suggests that 'in a WC, play can help students be creative and expand their thoughts… creative forces could likely be engaged and result in a more original text' (p. 138). Verbais isn't the only writing center director who used play to engage students. Denise Stephenson (2001) had writers use LEGO bricks to model their papers' content, construct narratives, and better understand the writing process, and adds:

> These are only a few of the diverse ways students use the toys… Unlike the constraints many students
> feel about writing with all of its rules, leaving this an open and creative exercise allows freedom to
> develop their structures in whatever way their thinking works. (Stephenson, 2001, p. 7)

But while these writers explicitly theorize a connection between a specific type of play and specific aspects of writing, many other writing centers, including ours, also use play for the less tangible goals of promoting self-care and relaxation and creating opportunities for enjoyment.

Libraries as Play Spaces
Games at the Library

Playing games in libraries is not a new occurrence but has been discussed for over 150 years (Nicholson, 2013). However, as most articles are written by practitioners in this area, there is a heavy focus on gaming programs and collections in public libraries, even though all types of libraries provide gaming services. Gaming is a term that includes tabletop, card games, console games, role-playing games, computer games, and video games. For this article, we will be focusing on non-electronic games and the use of games versus circulation policies and collection development, as that is what is relevant to our library.

Even though games have been played in libraries for years, a resurgence of gaming and inclusion of what is considered gaming in libraries came about at the turn of the century. In the USA, the efforts of Scott Nicholson and Jenny Levine began two initiatives: the Games and Gaming Members Interest Group for the American Library Association (ALA), which is now called the Games and Gaming Round Table (GameRT); and National Gaming Day @ your library, which has evolved into International Games Week (IGW) with global participation (Nicholson, 2013, p.355). Nicholson and Levine's efforts have increased gaming in libraries as well as contributed to the literature about gaming because of their work in the 2000s and on. IGW is 'an initiative run by volunteers from around the world to reconnect communities through their libraries around the educational, recreational, and social value of all types of games' (ALA GameRT, 2022). GameRT facilitates the IGW and its related elements such as maintaining a resource of free print-and-play games. IGW reminds patrons that the library has recreational as well as educational materials and that all types of libraries are interested in play. Alternatively, CounterPlay festival in Denmark, which brings together individuals from multiple disciplines to explore play reminds educators that play is for all ages (Poulsen, 2019). The hands-on workshop nature of CounterPlay focuses on how theory can be put into practice. Librarians, like Megan Lotts, have attended CounterPlay and evolved their librarianship practices based on its presentations (Lotts, 2021, p. 20).

The Academic Library & Games

Academic libraries have been involved in gaming through gamification of concepts in one-shots and training, hosting gaming programs, and even forming collections of gaming materials for special collections. Implementation of gamification within instruction requires a change in design thinking to meet the outcomes and be accessible to all (Reed & Miller, 2020). Gamification of instruction can be controversial for some, seen as

manipulating extrinsic motivation and devaluing the knowledge journey by focusing only on outcome (Hughes & Lacy, 2016). Explanations of its importance, such as increased student motivation and engagement, and examples to support one's use of it are available within the literature (Smale, 2011; Snyder Broussard, 2012) as well as reviews of the various mechanics individuals have utilized to implement digital gamification (Urban, 2019). Additionally, Blummer and Kenton (2019) identified, in a systemic review of academic library outreach, that gaming was used as library outreach to provide information literacy instruction and orientation to the library's resources (p. 187).

More relevant to our project, however, is the use of games and gaming to increase engagement with the library itself. For example, Slobuski et al. (2020) note that 'more academic libraries have shown interest in incorporating games into their programs, whether for learning, to provide safe alternatives to the 'traditional' college nightlife, to reach out and engage the campus community, or simply because games are fun' (p. 240). In-house video game and tabletop tournaments and games like *Humans versus Zombies* and *Capture the Flag* remind the students games are fun, and so is the library (Elzen & Roush, 2013; Otto et al., 2016; Womack, 2015). Lotts (2021) describes coordinating with the archives for students to view *College the Game: Rutgers Edition* prior to creating their own game as a final assignment (p. 16). Beyond playing games and hosting events, academic libraries collect and preserve game collections in their archives such as the Ray & Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies, Cary Playing Card Collection, and Stephen M. Cabrinety Collection in the History of Microcomputing (Bowling Green, 2022; Wohlmut, 2022; Yale University, 2022). Academic libraries in the last two decades have broadened how they have used games in instruction, outreach, and collection.

Playing with Space at a Regional University

Locally, our writing center and library began using play to engage students with our spaces in 2013. For the writing center, the motivating factor was moving into a spacious, new, purpose-built center on the main floor of the library, where we finally had more than the bare minimum of both space and essential resources like chairs, tables, and whiteboards. But in both cases, we initially used play intuitively and with far more of trial and error than theoretical grounding in our approach. In part, this was driven by the continual renovation, which radically changed the layout of each library floor and disrupted library and other services in various ways throughout the entire construction process.

Playing in the Writing Center

Our Writing Center is open from the morning to the late evening during weekdays (9am-9pm Monday-Thursday most semesters). Before the pandemic, our evening was set aside for drop-in appointments rather than traditional, hour-long appointments. Drop-in appointments are shorter (maximum 20 minutes during busy times) and more focused on answering patron's writing questions than our more holistic hour-long consultations. Often, entire classes are required to use the Writing Center for specific assignments, and the evening before those assignments are due can be busy and exuberant. When we first instituted these drop-in appointments, patrons would sign in

and then leave the Writing Center and sit either in the seating area immediately outside the Writing Center or in other library spaces. While we always encourage our patrons to use the library, frequently we would get to a name on the list and then not be able to locate the patron when it was their turn for a consultation. To mitigate patrons leaving the area entirely, we instituted a few activities to engage those waiting patrons.

The first activity we tried was a "build a story" activity. We had used this activity for team building when training our Writing Center employees. On an easel pad, one of our employees would write one sentence to start the story, and then everyone was encouraged to add to the story by writing sentences on slips of paper and taping them to the easel pad. Once one page was filled, the story was completed, and a new story began. While our Writing Center employees loved the activity, the patrons did not seem to want to participate. Occasionally a patron would add to the story, but we soon realized that the play portion of the activity—seeing where the story would go—was not readily available to the patrons, so they did not feel the drive to participate. One hypothesis of why this might be the case comes from Whitton (2018). Whitton states that adult play is 'fundamentally different' than the play of children because of the different ways adults value and perceive what is acceptable and what isn't. That might be the case here: patrons might have had some performance anxiety; they may have been afraid of being judged for their writing abilities. Another hypothesis is that our patrons are in "take a break" mode when they are participating in these kinds of activities in this space and are less willing to participate in activities that require a lot of thinking. For many of our patrons writing can be a challenge, which would explain the lack of participation. While we did not abandon the story idea, we added additional playful activities to encourage patrons to stay within the Writing Center or the liminal spaces outside the Writing Center.

Our most successful activity has been providing coloring pages. For this activity, we printed free coloring pages, provided a couple of boxes of colored pencils and markers, and sat everything on a table at the entrance of the Writing Center. Both morning and evening patrons were encouraged to color while waiting for their appointment to begin. Many patrons participated by coloring: some would start a new coloring page, and others would add to an already started coloring page. Occasionally, patrons would come into the Writing Center with the express purpose of grabbing a coloring page to take with them to use somewhere else. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we removed all the coloring pages from the Writing Center (along with any other shared activities). After we reopened to face-to-face appointments, we provided coloring pages for an IGW event in 2021, and they were once again our most popular activity. As was the case with the "build a story" activity, we have only theories about why coloring pages were the most popular activity we provided. Our best theory is that coloring pages do not take much concentration and can be easily started and stopped.

Another playful activity we've implemented with some success is a LEGO table. As Stephenson (2001) mentioned, tactile play activity assists in working through ideas and getting them in writing. We implemented the LEGO table as another option besides the coloring pages to entertain waiting patrons. We first placed the LEGO table outside the Writing Center, and that was a somewhat popular placement. Eventually, it was moved

permanently inside the Writing Center because of fears of having the LEGO pieces lost or stolen. The LEGO table replaced the coloring pages as the activity at the entrance to the Writing Center, and the coloring pages (and later, origami) were moved to the space directly outside the Writing Center on the main floor of the library. This location change didn't discourage patrons from using the table, and it allowed the staff to get a better sense of its usage. Some patrons simply used the LEGO as fidget toys, holding them and stacking a few together in no identifiable shape. No patrons built anything elaborate, but a few chemistry students waiting for help on their lab reports built models of chemical structures using the blocks as different parts of the molecule, reflecting what Gee (2017) ascertained regarding games creating better understanding for complex concepts.

Origami was one of the first playful activities we incorporated into our Writing Center, but it wasn't as successful as the other activities. While origami (and to a certain extent, coloring) fall more into the category of art rather than play, we have categorized them as playful activities because they are creative outlets in which one would not normally participate when using library/writing center services. We tried to increase engagement by placing the materials and instructions in several locations both within the entrance of the Writing Center and directly outside the Writing Center. Most patrons didn't interact with it in a meaningful way, and those who did became frustrated. We tried finding instructions that were relatively easy to follow, but what we found was that most printed instructions were difficult to follow unless the patron already had a previous introduction to the folds used in origami. We bought a couple of books, but even those were too advanced for true beginners to follow. One group of patrons that interacted with the origami was international students; therefore, we quit using origami as a playful activity for our general student population and instead incorporated it into our conversation partner program to add more creative outlets for our international student population, since Hendricks (2020) stated that creative play enhances cognitive development. Origami, if one is not familiar with the basic folds, can be really complicated and take a lot of concentration. If our hypothesis that activities that require less concentration are easier for patrons to engage in when taking a break or waiting for services, that explains this discrepancy because conversation partners are trying to learn rather than take a break, so their brains are in learning mode rather than taking a break mode.

Our Writing Center runs a conversation program for international students. While this program is not explicitly writing-related, international students use the Writing Center at a higher rate than the general student population. There was a need for these students to practice speaking English, and we decided to fill that need. One thing we quickly discovered was that our hour-long appointments were often too long to keep up a conversation with someone who was in the process of learning English and not necessarily able to contribute to keeping the conversation flowing naturally. Some of our employees started using lists of questions to keep the conversation going, but others turned to games and activities. One employee, working with a student whose English was at the beginner level when they first started using our conversation partner program, was particularly successful in using card games to keep the conversation flowing and incorporate new vocabulary that isn't usually covered in "normal" conversation topics. This creativity on the part of the writing center employee

exemplifies how using gamification when instructing students requires user-focus to ensure their needs are meet and the material is accessible (Reed & Miller, 2020, 5). Others used our existing origami paper and instructions to engage their conversation partner. Eventually, we bought a few two-player board games, like Connect 4, so that the employees had more options for engaging in playful activities with their conversation partners. Because we have regular Writing Center consultations simultaneously scheduled during conversation partner appointments, most of our conversation partner pairs choose to have their appointments in parts of the library that were not the Writing Center. They often meet either in the space directly outside the Writing Center or near Axe Grind on the library's main floor.

Play at the University Library

PSU Library Services welcome undergraduate students, graduate students, university staff and faculty, alumni, and community patrons to their spaces. The main library location is open most days from 7:30 am until 11 pm and there is no barrier to accessing the library, such as keycard entry. Most of the first-floor functions in the traditional role of a library with service points, workspaces, and computers, but the first floor of the building can be a thoroughfare for students seeking a classroom or a meeting with one of the departments. The renovation changed the layout of the building and the locations of the materials, and we are still learning how to best utilize the spaces that have been created.

The library renovation left us with different and more nebulous boundaries between the areas of the library; therefore, these spaces do not have a designated use. The renovation added designated study rooms with doors so that patrons can isolate themselves from other activities occurring on the first floor. Previously, the first floor contained many eight-foot-long tables with up to eight wooden chairs arranged around the table. Post-renovation, those tables are gone and were replaced with smaller tables and clusters of bench seating, small couches, and padded chairs. The goal of these new furnishings was to have space that was more flexible and able to be quickly rearranged for different purposes. For example, Axe Grind and the nearby space can be transformed from traditional study space to an arrangement for poetry reading to a formal reception, creating new opportunities for patrons to meet (Dale & Burrell, 2008). The space looks much more inviting, but it is not necessarily conducive to playful activities that require more than two or three people.

One of our first forays into play-oriented programming was jigsaw puzzles. We spread out the puzzle pieces on a table to give the impression of a puzzle in progress and waited to see what would happen (Figure 1). Initially, puzzles were located near the copier and print release station, which is an area where a queue can form. Individuals waiting in the queue would occasionally look at the puzzle and move a piece while waiting to print or scan. Queues are one of those ever-changing spaces Sunstein (1998) described that can make people feel uncomfortable. Although this was new for our campus community, patrons quickly recognized the invitation and began to gravitate toward the puzzle. We hypothesize the tactile and visual nature of puzzles make them an especially appealing brain break for people who have come to the library to read, study, or do research

specifically because they don't require language. As mentioned by Gordon (2014), play by adults can decrease stress which makes any play, a great brain break. Adding more chairs to the puzzle tables turned them into an opportunity to spend downtime with a friend, allowing library patrons to combine library work with social engagement. Through observations and anecdotes conveyed to library staff, faculty members would spend 15 minutes and students would huddle around a puzzle for 30 minutes. Moreover, an in-progress puzzle is a low-pressure activity without a deadline—very different from most of the work that brings patrons into academic libraries — and meets the perceived acceptability of play in a library by being a quiet activity (Whitton, 2018). The visual presence of a puzzle in progress contributes to the impression we are trying to create that the library is a complete academic home: a place to work, of course, but also a place to relax, and spend quality time alone or with like-minded friends.

Figure 1
Puzzles near the reading area at the beginning of International Games Week 2021
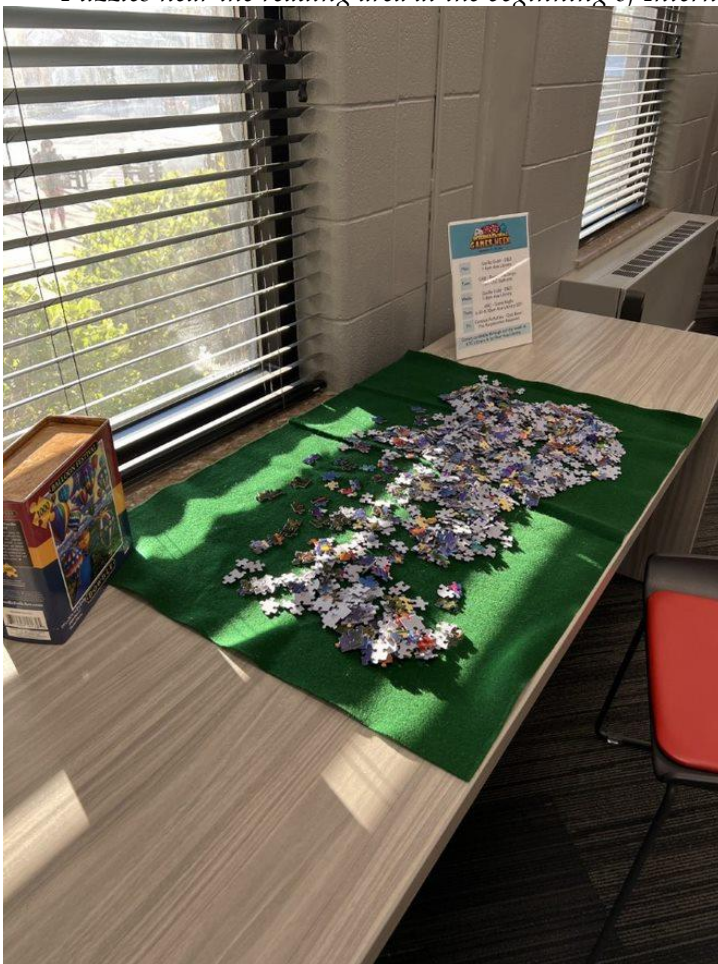
The success of puzzles and the recent enthusiasm for adult coloring as a form of self-care led us to add coloring to our repertoire of passive programming in liminal spaces. In addition to downloading free designs, we have participated in Color Our Collections, where items from our library's Special Collections & University Archives are turned into coloring pages (New York Academy of Medicine, 2022), as well as university-specific coloring pages from Campus Activities Center (CAC) and student organizations. In addition to make-and-take coloring

pages, the library invites creative expression through the white boards and glass marker boards and walls added during various stages of renovation (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Library patron's doodle on a glass board located within a study room on the first floor

Shortly before the pandemic, a new interest in tabletop games on our campus led us to explore the possibilities for including tabletop games in our passive programming. One attempt was an oversize chessboard, which we located prominently on the main floor of the library with a sign inviting library patrons to play. Through casual observation, we did see people stopping to play chess and teach others how to play. Chess is one of the oldest library gaming programs in the United States with records back to the mid-1800s in San Francisco (Nicholson, 2013, p. 344). Another passive tabletop game was checkers, which similarly to chess had some individuals stopping to play.

More ambitiously, we began to do active programming around games for special events. Active programming with student organizations requires coordination from marketing to equipment needs to participants; this is different from play and passive programming in liminal spaces as there is a required level of discovery and patron choice. During International Games Week 2019, for example, student organizations with a gaming focus were invited to join us to celebrate IGW with game-based events in the library. One campus gaming group opened their regular meeting to the public and held it at the library. These events were promoted and advertised within the library on signage and digitally on the library's website and social media channels, but they also attracted drop-in participants. Perhaps equally importantly, we hope that the highly visible presence of people playing games in the library would, again, have contributed to library patrons' overall impression of the library as the hub of campus life.

The campus lockdown for the second half of spring semester 2020 put a temporary end to our use of play in the library's physical spaces. We did consider synchronous virtual game nights, but our feedback from student workers and colleagues in Student Life was that students were too overwhelmed and too oversaturated with online experiences. We compromised by creating an asynchronous virtual escape room (bit.ly/DiscoverPSU). It had high engagement: over 700 clicks, and more than 90 patrons completed the survey at the end.

When the campus reopened, Axe Grind remained closed and high-touch items such as puzzles, coloring materials, and tabletop games were temporarily retired, leaving only the whiteboards and glass marker boards. However, during this time, patrons also appeared to be more focused on task completion and less likely to linger in the library, perhaps due to the perceived risk of spending time indoors around other people. Unlike the previous semester, we did offer synchronous virtual play options during 2020-2021. This included virtual trivia nights, in partnership with the Campus Activities Center (Monnier et al, 2021), and a Zoom game night in conjunction with a student organization during IGW 2020.

With the more emphatic return to in-person learning for fall 2021, we anticipated that many patrons might experience heightened anxiety about using the library in person due to concerns about COVID-19. We were also concerned about the possibility of increased library anxiety among patrons. Library anxiety can be caused by feelings of being lost, by feelings of inadequacy in the face of unfamiliar online search tools, and by difficulty navigating to location of materials in the library's physical collection (Mellon, 1986). This was a concern for the students from the fall 2020 class, who had entirely missed out on the in-person library experiences that are ordinarily part of their first semester courses, which meant they might feel lost or unfamiliar with finding library materials in the building. With this in mind, library faculty took the initiative to coordinate in-person IGW activities in the library. The emphasis for IGW 2021 was on in-person, in-the-building activities involving the library and our partners, including the writing center, and student organizations. In addition to the library-sponsored passive programming, such as games on the glass boards and the return of puzzles, student organizations focused on gaming also participated. One student organization hosted Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) campaigns on two days, provided information about D&D, welcomed novice players, and allowed individuals to come and go throughout the campaigns. They were set up in the high visibility area near Axe Grind to allow potentially interested individuals a low-stakes opportunity to observe play in progress. Another student organization turned their meeting into an open game night, held in a glass walled classroom in the basement, to attract potentially interested passers-by. Both student organizations were happy with their turnout, and the library also benefited in collaborating with student organizations as they attracted patrons who might not have previously thought of the library as their natural home gave us an opportunity to try to get those participants to see themselves as library patrons. By working with student organizations, the library benefitted as students were reminded that the library is fun (Elzen & Roush, 2013; Otto et al., 2016; Womack, 2015), and we potentially reached new student populations.

Preliminary Exploration

To better understand how patrons use this space for play, we set up different kinds of activities in the space during IGW, 7-13 November 2021. During IGW, we gauged their use by visually identifying when patrons were using the space for play. As patrons were engaging in the play activities in liminal spaces, from IGW and until the end of the semester, we asked anyone we observed engaging in these activities if they were willing to participate in our exploratory study by being interviewed. We focused on two areas that can be considered liminal: the small seating area outside the Writing Center and an area near a small reading area in the library. Activities set up outside the Writing Center changed daily: Monday was origami, Tuesday was Connect4 and Scrabble, Wednesday was coloring pages, Thursday was LEGO, and Friday was card games. Figure 3 shows the area staged with the activities.

Figure 3
International Games Week activity outside the Writing Center

Many playful activities were portable. Therefore, some were moved to other areas by patrons, mainly to the seating area near Axe Grind.

A copy of the interview questions are below:

- What is your status (PSU undergraduate, faculty, community member, etc.)?
- Have you already participated in an interview about engaging in playful activities in the library?
- What are your experiences of playing games at Axe Library and the Writing Center?
- How often do you play in these spaces?
- What types of games do you tend to play in these spaces? Why?
- Who do you play with? Do you play by yourself? Do you play with others you don't know? Do you meet

up with anyone?

- Is there anything else you would like to say about the games/play opportunities at Axe Library?

User Feedback

To better understand how the students at our university use our space, we completed some informal interviews with students during International Games Week. The interviews took place in various locations throughout the library. Most took place in the areas where playful activities were already set up, but other interviews took place in Axe Grind on the library's first floor. We did not set up any playful activities near Axe Grind, but the interview participants in that area had moved games from outside the Writing Center to that area, so that they could play games with a bigger group of people. Most interview participants indicated that they had experience playing games in the library and Writing Center. Participants had varied answers, but one theme was repeated: fun. As stated by one participant, the activity was 'very enjoyable and fun'. Only one participant indicated that it was their first time participating in playful activities in the library. The other participants' answers ranged from 'two-three times a semester when I'm happy' to 'sometimes with friends, especially at the end of semester' to 'once a week'. The types of playful activities participants mentioned having participated in included LEGO, puzzles, Uno, Connect 4, and various card games (Speed, Go Fish, ERF). Other participants responded that they didn't have a favorite activity and participated in whatever was available. The final question asked interviewees what they wanted to comment on about the play opportunities at the library. There were a variety of responses, such as 'wish that every university had something like this', 'a fun space more than educational space is a great way to involve students. Love doing this during finals', 'love to have more variety of games', and 'would like more games'. From these responses, the theme of adding more games emerged.

In addition to interviewing library patrons, we also interviewed Writing Center employees about their experiences playing games in the space. The Writing Center employees all mentioned participating in playful activities with their conversation partners. One mentioned, 'It was fun to play with my conversation partner because I got to teach her new games; she didn't know any of them. We were able to talk and hang out during it, so it was fun!' All three Writing Center employees indicated that they engaged in playful activities in the library with their conversation partner(s) at least once a week. One employee answered the question by saying, 'It is something I do with my conversation partners every time, so three times a week'. Writing Center employees were the biggest proponents of card games, and library patrons had varied answers.

Space usage & liminality

Because our ability to interview patrons about space usage was limited due to time constraints and the pandemic, we couldn't determine much about how patrons felt about space usage at the library. Our focus was on targeting areas where students may experience a feeling of unease, as Sunstein (1998) explained liminal spaces sometimes cause. We observed that patrons did gravitate toward areas where playful activities had been set up, especially in the area right outside the writing center. The puzzle, which was moved from a more centralized area after the

construction was completed, seemed to have fewer patrons than previously. We also found that patrons were willing to move games and other portable playful activities to other parts of the library. This was not something that we expected but seems to indicate that access to games allows patrons to feel comfortable breaching liminal spaces within the library that they might not otherwise try to cross.

Experience with playful activities

While our interviews were influenced by the fact that we only interviewed those who were already using playful activities in the library, our results showed that the activities that we were using were enjoyed by the patrons who were interested in participating in those kinds of activities. The responses reflected what we had learned from our previous research about playful activities in library spaces. For example, one reason academic libraries incorporate games and play is for fun (Slobuski et al., 2020) and our exploration exhibited this truth from our patrons' responses. Furthermore, the social interactions aided patrons' development due to the social skills required to either negotiate rules or move locations (Henricks, 2020), as seen in the conversation partners explaining rules, or students taking activities to Axe Grind. The conversation partners highlighted the work of Forsyth (2012) and Batt (2010) in using play-based learning to develop and improve skills. D&D, or interactive storytelling, also uses play-based activities to improve social skills, problem-solving, and imagination (Forsyth, 2012). Passive programming in liminal spaces minimizes potential judgement on perceived acceptability of play and judgement of others (Whitton, 2018). One thing we hadn't found in previous research was how often patrons participated in these kinds of activities, so seeing the wide range of answers in our interviews was both interesting and helpful.

Future plans

Based on the feedback we received from the interviews and the research we did on games in library spaces, we are going to implement several changes to the playful spaces in our library:

- Adding more games, especially multi-player games.
- Adding games to the area near Axe Grind.
- Adding more two-player games and other playful activities to the writing center.

These changes will allow our patrons to feel comfortable in the new liminal spaces that were created during the renovation of our building while also engaging them with library and other related services, including the writing center. By starting with small and simple steps, we are able to observe, adapt, and grow playful spaces that meet the needs of our patrons.

Conclusion

Library staff and library patrons are still learning to use the new spaces created by the library renovation. Engaging patrons in anything, learning or otherwise, in a post-pandemic world will not be as simple as going back to normal, but rather will take trial and error. However, using playful activities in the library's liminal spaces

to engage patrons and make them feel comfortable in those spaces does seem to be a strategy that patrons want to continue. Our presumptions about how patrons used the space - learning, taking a break, or socializing - matched our interview participants' statements, and they enjoyed the available activities. It is evident that activities that are easy to start and stop, don't require much thought, and are one-time activities that don't require follow-up, are preferred by many of our patrons. Given this, we will continue to use coloring sheets, LEGO, and other similar activities in the liminal space in front of the writing center to increase engagement with that space. In the library, we will incorporate more simple games with few rules and place them closer to Axe Grind which is where the patrons prefer to be.

For other libraries, we recommend that you start simple, observe, and grow your playful activities to meet your patrons' needs, versus over-planning and over-thinking a play and gaming strategy. Having play opportunities is as important for adults as it is for younger individuals. How will you provide opportunities for relaxation, social interaction, and fun within your liminal spaces?

References

ALA GameRT. (2022). *International games week*. Games in Libraries. https://games.ala.org/international-games-week/

Amorim, A. N., Jeon, L., Abel, Y., Felisberto, E. F., Barbosa, L. N. F., & Dias, N. M. (2020). Using Escribo play video games to improve phonological awareness, early reading, and writing in preschool. *Educational Researcher*, *49*(3), 188-197. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20909824

Batt, T. (2010). Using play to teach writing. *American Journal of Play, 3*(1), 63-81. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1070224

Blummer, B. & Kenton, J. (2019). Academic Libraries' Outreach Efforts: Identifying Themes in the Literature. *Public Services Quarterly,* (*15*)3, 179-204. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2019.1592058

Boquet, E. (2008). "Our little secret": A history of writing centers, pre- to post-open admissions. In R. W. Barnett & J. S. Blumner (Eds.), *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. (pp. 41-60). Pearson Longman. (Original work published 1999).

Bowling Green State University. (2022). *BGSU: Pop Culture Library*. https://www.bgsu.edu/library/pcl.html

Carino, P. (2008). Early writing centers: Toward a history. In R. W. Barnett & J. S. Blumner (Eds.), *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice.* (pp. 10-21). Pearson Longman. (Original work published 1995).

Dale, K., & Burrell, G. (2008). *The spaces of organisation & the organisation of space: Power, identity & materiality at work.* Palgrave.

Elzen, A. M. V., & Roush, J. (2013). Brawling in the library: Gaming programs for impactful outreach and instruction at an academic library. *Library Trends*, *61*(4), 802-813. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2013.0016

Forsyth, E. (2012). Learning through play: Games and crowdsourcing for adult education. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, *25*(4), 166-173. https://www.proquest.com/openview/3fc0e690d3c167f3348c3b34f13259bb/1

Gee, J. P. (2017). Affinity spaces and 21st century learning. *Educational Technology*, *57*(2), 27-31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44430520

Gordon, G. (2014). Well played: The origins and future of playfulness. *American Journal of Play*, *6*(2), 234. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1023802

Henricks, T. S. (2020). Play studies: A brief history. *American Journal of Play*, *12*(2), 114-155. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1255272

Hughes, M., & Lacy, J. (2016). "The sugar'd game before thee": Gamification revisited. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 16(2), 311-326. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2016.0019

Kanhadilok, P., & Watts, M. (2014). Adult play-learning: Observing informal family education at a science museum. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 46*(1), 23–41. https://doi-org.library.pittstate.edu/10.1080/02660830.2014.11661655

Lotts, M. (2021). *Advancing a culture of creativity in libraries: programming and engagement.* ALA Editions.

Mellon, C. (1986). Library anxiety: A grounded theory and its development. *College & Research Libraries, 47*(2), 160-165. https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/14195/15641

Miller, S. (2008). Then everybody jumped for joy! (But Joy didn't like it, so she left). In K. Devorak & S. Bruce (Eds.), *Creative approaches to writing center work* (pp. 21-47). Hampton Press.

Monnier, R., Mercer, M., & Stark, A. (2021). Education and entertainment: Developing new pathways to student engagement through Library Services and Student Life partnerships. *Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings, 11*(1). https://doi.org/10.4148/2160-942X.1082

New York Academy of Medicine. (2022). *#ColorOurCollections*. https://library.nyam.org/colorourcollections/

Nicholson, S. (2013). Playing in the past: A history of games, toys, and puzzles in North American libraries. T*he Library Quarterly (Chicago), 83*(4), 341-361. https://doi.org/10.1086/671913

North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English, 46*(5), 433-446. https://doi.org/10.2307/377047

Otto, J.L., Meade, Q.H., Stafford, J.L. and Wahler, P. (2016), Library lights out: A creative collaboration between the library, students, and university housing. *Digital Library Perspectives*, *32*(3), 192-208. https://doi.org/10.1108/DLP-09-2015-0018

Poulsen, M. (2018). The "what/why" of CounterPlay. http://www.counterplay.org/the-what-why-of-counterplay/

Ramani, G. B., & Eason, S. H. (2015). It all adds up: Learning early math through play and games. *Phi Delta*

Kappan, 96(8), 27-32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721715583959

Reed, K. N., & Miller, A. (2020). Applying gamification to the library orientation. *Information Technology and Libraries*, *39*(3), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v39i3.12209

Roskos, K. & Christie, J. (2013). Gaining ground in understanding the play-literacy relationship. *American Journal of Play, 6*(1), 83-97. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1016166

Slobuski, T., Johnson, E., Boehme, G., & Hays, L. (2020). Where do we go from here? Expanding the reach of your gaming events. In S. Crowe & E. Sclippa (Eds.), *Games and Gamification in Academic Libraries* (pp. 235-249). ALA Editions. https://sc.lib.miamioh.edu/handle/2374.MIA/6613

Smale, M. A. (2011). Learning through quests and contests: Games in information literacy instruction. J*ournal of Library Innovation*, 2(2), 36-55. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/4/

Snyder Broussard, M.J. (2012). Digital games in academic libraries: a review of games and suggested best practices. *Reference Services Review*, *40*(1), 75-89. https://doi.org/10.1108/00907321211203649

Stephenson, D. (2001). Constructive toys: More than a good time. *The Writing Lab Newsletter, 26*(2), 2-4.

Sunstein, B. S. (1998). Moveable feasts, liminal spaces: Writing centers and the state of in-betweenness. *The Writing Center Journal, 18*(2), 7-26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43442045

Urban, A. C. (2019). Serious games for information literacy: A scoping review and design recommendations. *Library Hi Tech*, *37*(4), 679-698. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHT-01-2019-0010

van Gennep, A. (1960). *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press.

Verbais, C. (2008). Incorporating play and toys into the writing center. In K. Devorak & S. Bruce (Eds.), *Creative approaches to writing center work* (pp. 135-146). Hampton Press.

Walsh, A. (2020). Playful learning for information literacy development. *IFLA Journal*, *46*(2), 143–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/0340035219874083

Whitton, N. (2018). Playful learning: Tools, techniques, and tactics. *Research in Learning Technology*, *26*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v26.2035

Wohlmut, C. (2022). *Cabrinety Videogame Collection.* https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt529018f2/.

Womack, H. D., Smith, S. S., & Lock, M. B. (2015). Large-scale, live-action gaming events in academic libraries: How and why. *College & Research Libraries News*, *76*(4), 210-214. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.76.4.9297

Yale University. (2022). *Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library: Playing Cards.* https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/cary-playing-card-database