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Play On: The Use of Games in Libraries



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ABSTRACT

The use of games in the library is a currently trending topic of discussion and writing in the Library and Information Science profession. Upon first consideration, gaming may seem to be irrelevant at best and a waste of time and resources at worst. However, gaming does have several significant implications for all types of libraries, including greater exposure to new information technologies and the sense of community that a gaming program can foster. Thus, libraries should seriously consider the benefits of gaming programs and be prepared to carefully develop collection policies and to properly plan gaming opportunities for their patrons. The following literature review highlights how other libraries have accomplished these goals, provides examples of the different types of gaming programs that can be implemented in libraries, and explains the advantages for the library that come with a gaming program.

Introduction

The use of games in the library is a hot topic of discussion in the Library and Information Science profession. This is illustrated by the many articles that have been written in recent years and by the increasing number of gaming programs and game collections in libraries across the country and across disciplines. Upon first consideration, gaming may seem to be irrelevant at best and a waste of time and resources at worst, especially since the oft-stated goal of librarianship is to provide access to information to the communities libraries serve. However, gaming does have several significant implications for the library and can be used to accomplish this goal.

First, the increasing ubiquities of digital technologies such as smartphones, tablets, and personal computers have introduced new literacies that need to be mastered (Gee, 2002; Elkins, 2015). These technologies, with their free apps and easy-to-use operating systems, have increased the popularity of gaming, which, inadvertently or intentionally, teach and require these literacies (Werner, 2013). Less affluent people, however, may not have ready access to these often-expensive devices, and children in particular might fall behind academically and socially because they are not familiar with these technologies. However, libraries, which have provided internet access to their communities for years, are poised to provide access to these digital devices in a similar manner (Elkins, 2015).

Gaming can also serve as a means for fostering greater community involvement with the library and its services. Libraries are also always seeking ways to attract patrons, especially those who rarely or never visit the library. To this end, game nights, for example, can encourage people to interact with the library, its staff, and its community in a fun and non-intimidating manner. In addition, increases in the size of video game collections and the provision of subscription gaming services in libraries meet the needs of avid gamers in the community.

This implies that libraries should seriously consider the benefits of gaming programs and be prepared to carefully develop collection policies and to properly plan gaming opportunities for their patrons. Though these activities may seem laborious, the benefits of implementing a successful gaming program will pay off. Evidence shows that organizing a library gaming program will encourage patrons to return for nongaming reasons (Nicholson, 2008). Ultimately, engaging in gaming programs can “spread the good news” of what the library can offer its users by encouraging the use of the library in the first place. Once people see and understand the helpful services the library can offer, they may become more active participants in the transfer of information, of which libraries play a critical role. Thus, gaming provides libraries with another means through which to create an informed citizenry and through it a better democracy. A review of the literature written about the successful view of games in the library illustrates how this goal is accomplished.

A Brief History of Games in Libraries

One article that was frequently referenced in the literature is Scott Nicholson’s 2013 article “Playing in the Past: A History of Games, Toys, and Puzzles in North American Libraries.” Nicholson points out that games have been in libraries for well over one hundred years, and his article is an excellent starting point for exploring both the proven and the potential impact that the proper use of games can have on libraries. Though gaming in libraries has been the topic of much recent discussion, Nicholson’s article illustrates that gaming is by no means a new library practice; as early as the 1800s, libraries were providing gaming opportunities for their patrons. In fact, in the early days of library gaming programs, games were introduced as a means of social reform through which libraries could provide their users with wholesome activities as a means of occupying their free time. To further encourage good behavior, libraries introduced games that taught moral lessons to their players (Nicholson, 2013).

In America specifically, organized chess clubs and tournaments were among the earliest offerings of game services in the public library. Later, especially during the Great Depression, American libraries collected and lent toys to children who could not afford their own and sponsored puzzle tournaments that offered cash prizes to winners. After this, the need to provide activities increased because libraries began

to focus more on younger patrons who needed assistance for school projects and because libraries were increasingly becoming social gathering places (Nicholson, 2013). These concepts and practices certainly laid the foundation for much of the theory behind modern-day library gaming programs and game collections.

Reasons for Games in Libraries

The literature highlights several reasons for libraries to include games in their collections and in their programming. First, education and recreation are often the primary goals of games; generally, a game has one of these two goals as its primary objective, but a game is certainly able to accomplish both goals to varying extents. Phetteplace and Felker (2014) state:

There is a bevy of educational research showing that people learn better when they are active participants in the learning process, and when knowledge is presented in a contextualized framework, so that they can see how and where knowledge is applied. Games can do both (p. 20).

Second, schools that have after-school gaming programs have noted the ability of games to help students hone their social skills both by allowing older and younger students to interact and by allowing more advanced students to help struggling students understand difficult game rules and concepts (Copeland, Henderson, Mayer, & Nicholson, 2013). Third, games have the ability to influence behavior in a positive manner (Elkins, 2015).

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, the increasing popularity of digital technologies and digital games demands that users become proficient in the “21st-century skills [of] critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and information and media literacy” (Elkins, 2015, p. 59). Again, poorer people do not have access to the digital games that their peers interact with daily. James Paul Gee highlights the responsibility of the library, “the great social equalizer of reading,” to meet a similar need with digital technology, especially since poorer children are “falling behind in new and important 21st-century media skills” (Gee, 2012, pp. 63-64). Librarians can address this problem by providing access and by providing media mentorship to these children. These practices will shrink the growing “digital gap” (Gee, 2012).

Challenges in Game Program Implementation

There are several concerns that are often raised when libraries seek to start offering gaming services to their patrons. Nicholson (2013) notes the hesitancy that some librarians themselves have: they worry that people will think they are wasting valuable resources by purchasing games. Elsewhere, he points out that librarians who are not prepared with evidence of successful game program implementation in other libraries faced increased difficulty in convincing administrators to fund

gaming programs (Nicholson, 2008). Planning a gaming program also requires that thought be given to the certain increase in noise levels that is the result of lively gaming. Werner (2013) notes that game programs can be loud so it is important to select areas and/or times that will keep noise distractions to a minimum.

Other challenges present themselves once programs are implemented. Some libraries, for example, have experienced theft of games. There is also the possibility of challenges from parents who think that games, video games in particular, have questionable content (Werner, 2013). Also, many video games and game consoles are expensive so collection growth may be hindered because of budgeting constraints (Elkins, 2015). It is also important to avoid selecting games that overemphasize the educational aspect of the game while underemphasizing the quality of the game; often, educational game designers are so consumed by what they are trying to teach that they fail to perfect the game experience (Forsyth, 2012; Phetteplace & Felker, 2014).

Categories of Games

Perhaps the current most popular category of games is digital games played on tablets, smartphones, and computers and through social media sites like Facebook (Elkins, 2015). Amanda Hovious and Richard N. Van Eck (2015) polled several teacher librarians about their perceptions and use of digital games and found that these librarians recognized the benefits of digital games and implemented them in their work. Indeed, digital games offer several learning benefits: they are “active, goal-oriented, contextualized, adaptive, and feedback-oriented” (p. 34). These characteristics allow digital games to promote literacy and foster important “critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and societal awareness” skills (Hovious & Van Eck, 2015, p. 34).

Video games comprise another gaming genre that has gained prominence in recent years. One study evaluated the potential of video games to serve as secondary and tertiary research sources because of their potential to convey information, looking specifically at video games that include historical content such as *Call of Duty 2* and *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*. While the study concluded that the games studied would not be useful sources, the authors did suggest that with new developments to video games, there was certainly potential for them to serve a more scholarly purpose (Thomas & Clyde, 2013). Some libraries offer video games for circulation (Nicholson, 2013).

Video games offer several benefits to players. Phetteplace and Felker (2014) write, “Video games... often present players with scenarios in which they need to learn a skill or piece of information, and then successfully apply it, in order to progress to the next stage or level of the game (p. 20).”

This encourages cognitive development. There are some disadvantages to video games, however. For instance, they are often replaced by newer, superior systems quickly. One solution is for libraries to provide access to online video games and to online subscription services that update automatically (Robson & Durkee, 2012).

Another means through which libraries can incorporate game playing into their libraries is role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. In fact, these kinds of games have their basis in the tradition of corporate storytelling and were certainly influenced by the major authors of fantasy literature, including J. R. R. Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* series. Role-playing games foster community building by enabling participants to gather to play at libraries that provide such services. However, Schneider and Hutchison (2015) note that role-playing materials are not frequently collected nor are they properly cataloged when they are collected.

Finally, tabletop games, a category that includes board games, card games, and puzzles (and sometimes role-playing games) are a convenient and fun means of encouraging gaming in libraries. In fact, some authors believe that tabletop games offer the advantages of portability, affordability, durability, and adaptability as well the capability of transmitting better understanding of game mechanics that are superior to the advantages offered by computer games (Copeland, Henderson, Mayer, & Nicholson, 2013).

Games in Public Libraries

Public libraries are ideal for introducing gaming programs. These programs foster community involvement in the library and introduce patrons to use the other services the library provides. Summer reading programs frequently feature games and game-like contests. Public libraries can also provide gaming services to senior citizens with time for activities (Nicholson, 2013). Additionally, gaming clubs provide tools for engaging the community. In discussing her library's recently implemented program, Kat Werner (2013) states the program "appeals to adolescent males, a population that is often difficult to bring into the library," and that these programs have "made the library more accessible and inviting. . . . Teens feel that we really want them here, and in turn they want to be a part of the library" (p. 796). Her program, for example, began at the request of a mother who wanted the library to host the popular card game *Yu Gi Oh* for her son, and library leaders agreed to do so since the library already had other *Yu Gi Oh* products. They set aside time each week for a group to play the game; after the success of this program, they began to offer other gaming programs (board games, video games). Other libraries could certainly benefit from programs similar to the ones Werner describes. She also suggests that libraries host gaming tournaments to attract more players. Tournaments provide opportunities for raising money and for spreading awareness of the library's gaming program (Werner, 2013).

Games in School Libraries

School libraries can also greatly benefit from the use of games and the sponsoring of gaming clubs. The article “Three Different Paths for Tabletop Gaming in School Libraries” (Copeland et al., 2013) chronicles the experiences of several different schools that incorporate gaming in their programs and can serve as inspiration for other school librarians who wish to implement games into their programs. In the article, games such as *Apples to Apples* and *I Spy* are used in one school’s elementary grades to teach word and language skills. One school in Arizona hosts a large role-playing game that recreates the “Trial of Socrates.” Students spend months preparing for this game by studying the history and literature of Socrates’ time period. Other school libraries mentioned in the article have successfully implemented after-school gaming programs that allow students to use critical thinking skills to learn how to play the game and how to abide by the game’s rules. In addition, these programs provide opportunities for students to learn how to be good sports, and the article presents several strategies for dealing with bad sports (Copeland et al., 2013).

Aaron Elkins (2015) encourages a school librarian who wishes to incorporate gaming into his or her library to “start small and work your way forward as you give gaming an opportunity to flourish in your school library” (p. 62). Furthermore, Elkins suggests that school librarians themselves play and become familiar with popular games, digital and video games especially, so that they are able to discuss these with the children they serve in order to foster stronger relationships with them. Finally, because gaming provides “highly motivating informal learning environments to further develop those learners’ information literacy skills,” (Elkins, p. 63) it is also important for school librarians to work with the teachers to choose games that are of maximum benefit to students’ needs (Elkins, 2015, p. 63; Nicholson, 2013, p. 351).

Games in Academic Libraries

Several academic libraries have discovered the benefits of gaming programs, implementing game nights as a regular part of their academic year schedules and collecting games for circulation. In a very helpful article for any academic librarian seeking guidance for starting gaming programs, Blodgett and Bremer (2014) describe their program at the Rodney A. Briggs Library at the University of Minnesota Morris. They extend their Friday evening hours for a monthly game night that includes basic board and card games and sometimes special, more involved games like speed dating and indoor putt-putt. They introduced game nights to attract students who do not normally visit the library and to allow the students to interact with library staff in a different, less formal way. They found that the implementation of this program did accomplish their goals, and they learned that a key to good student participation is good publicity for the event (Blodgett & Bremer, 2014).

Academic libraries incorporate games into their programs and collections in other ways as well. There has been a trend either to begin or to increase offering video and digital games to student patrons. Some academic libraries collect video games to meet students' entertainment needs while other academic libraries collect video games to support the curriculum of video game design programs. One library provides a gaming station for video game access and video game events (Robson & Durkee, 2012). Also, as the focus of academic libraries continues to shift toward students and their needs and the library is increasingly viewed as a learning commons, game collections that include digital, video, and tabletop games that are accessible to students make sense (Nicholson, 2013). Academic libraries are also incorporating games and activities into new student orientation and into information literacy instruction (Phetteplace & Felker, 2014).

Community Involvement and Collaboration

Libraries of all sorts can and have benefitted from collaborating with community groups and retailers in their gaming programs. For academic libraries, collaboration between the library and student organizations (student government, clubs) or other campus departments (student services, etc.) encourages more campus involvement, garners more help for events, and allows the events to grow when resources are pooled (Blodgett & Bremer, 2014). Any library that has active gaming programs would certainly benefit from a partnership with a local gaming store. Owners of these establishments can provide prizes for tournaments, can function as cosponsors for gaming events, and, as in the case of University of Minnesota Morris, can even test new games they wish to offer on library gamers (Blodgett & Bremer, 2014). Werner's (2013) public library consulted with a local video game retailer to choose the games and gaming systems that would best serve the needs of the library and its patrons. Libraries can also seek advice from local game retailers on how to run the tournament and can ask the retailer to advertise the library's event in his or her establishment, or provide prizes for tournaments (Werner, 2013). Werner (2013) also suggests that librarians seek out and join community board game clubs in order to try out new games and to seek game suggestions. Club members may also be willing to volunteer at library gaming events (Werner, 2013).

Gamification

Another trending way to incorporate games into libraries is through gamification, or "the process of applying game mechanics and game thinking to the real world to solve problems and engage users" (Phetteplace and Felker, 2014, p. 20). According to Phetteplace and Felker (2014), library gamification is performed in two primary ways. First, gamification occurs when rewards or point-earning systems are applied to existing library practices; second, gamification occurs when a library concept is taught through the creation and playing of a game.

Gamification is a tactic that could be used to increase the patron's information literacy because it helps people become "active participants in the learning process" (Phetteplace & Felker, 2014, p. 20). Phetteplace and Felker (2014) offer several library activities that could be aided by the use of gamification: library orientation, information literacy instruction, resource usage, and reading programs (pp. 20-21). Bohyun Kim (2015) notes the "real power of gamification [lies] in motivating people and even enabling them to change their behavior for a goal that they decide to achieve" (p. 20). Gamification is probably most readily recognized in summer reading programs when libraries encourage participation by offering rewards that can be earned by reading a certain number of books and by participating in program activities (Nicholson, 2013; Kim, 2015).

Game Creation

Game creation is another way to utilize games in libraries. Nicholson (2013) observes, "Creating a game not only allows for the social and mental benefits of game play but also introduces design, creation, art, writing, planning, testing, and other skills" (p. 357). Several authors discuss the benefits of allowing library users, especially students, to design their own games as part of a library gaming program. Game creation allows students to "use the fundamentals of game design and demonstrate knowledge of various topics as well as have the opportunity to express their own worldviews and values" (Powell, 2013, p. 838).

According to Annmarie Powell (2013), a program at a library in south Florida encouraged the children who attended the gaming program to create live-action versions of popular digital games. This activity allowed the children to experience the cognitive benefits of video games through real-world application. Some game programs at school libraries encourage students to design their own tabletop games. This allows for feedback from classmates and for collaboration between students who have unique learning styles (Copeland et al., 2013). Game design can also occur among the adult members of a community. Forsyth (2012) suggests that adults could create a game based on the history of their community; not only would they learn creative skills, they would also discover their past.

Conclusion

"Games are a powerful way to engage people with ideas and with each other," writes Ellen Forsyth (2012, p. 166). Game collection and gaming programs are, indeed, of great benefit to all types of libraries. They are able to function as tools for learning, means of entertainment, and opportunities for people to interact and build community together. Librarians seeking to implement games into libraries are certain to find excellent resources that will help them establish guidelines, develop collection policies, plan events, and defend the use of games in libraries to those who would question it. The documented success of fellow librarians can serve as an inspiration and motivation for all who are actively engaged in library work. †

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