

Public Libraries and Videogaming

The discussion of videogames and gaming activities in public libraries tends to raise eyebrows. Frequent objections to public libraries owning and circulating videogames, or sponsoring gaming events, are that the most popular games have no educational value, videogames are violent or have inappropriate sexual content, and that videogames are only of interest to teens. Other frequently mentioned concerns are that videogaming will sap library funding, divert the library from its mission, and that there will be public and board objections about the appropriateness of having the games and offering programs using them. Several recent articles have addressed these concerns. This is a summary of what some of the writers in professional library publications have to say about videogames and gaming in public libraries.

If Videogames are Entertainment, Do They Belong in Public Libraries?

The fiction sections of public libraries are evidence that resources that are entertaining and provide recreation are appropriate investments for public libraries. Most DVDs and videos that libraries circulate are movies rather than documentaries. It is hard to argue, then, that public libraries should not offer videogames because they have entertainment value.

Elizabeth Danforth addressed this issue in her article for *BiblioTech*. She said that libraries are heavily into education and entertainment. Games have elements of both. Libraries recently have been stressing their role as a community commons. Danforth feels there is a need to provide space for gaming in that commons. Players need a place to go to play with other gamers, even if they are all moving their avatars together in cyberspace while playing on their own laptops. Danforth says that some people have called multi-user games, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, the “new golf.” These types of games have become social networks that librarians and business people can’t afford to ignore.¹

Videogames that Are Primarily Entertaining Have Educational and Social Value

Emerging studies of videogames continually find that there are significant learning and social values involved in videogame playing, even with games that are primarily recreational. In a 2007 *VOYA* article, Erin Helmrich and Eli Neiburger, Ann Arbor Public Library, Michigan, explain that videogaming meets 17 of the “40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents” identified by the Search Institute of Minneapolis.²

Heather Wilson asserts, in her *VOYA* article, that most librarians are not part of the gaming culture. She says that librarians who lament videogames are missing an important point. Gaming requires reading, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. She thinks that videogaming helps teens learn in a way that is unfamiliar to most librarians.³

The “Educational Values of Videogaming” is covered in more detail in another summary on the DLTCL Adolescent Literacy Initiative web page at www.dpi.wi.gov/pld/adolit.html.

¹Danforth, Elizabeth. “Games, Gaming, and Gamers: Why You Want Them in Your Libraries.” *BiblioTech*. October 2007.

²“40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents.” Minneapolis, MN; Search Institute.

³Wilson, Heather. “Gaming for Librarians: An Introduction.” *VOYA*. February, 2005.

Videogames Today Are about More than Sex and Violence

The popular press and television are quick to sensationalize adult content videogames that are extremely violent, contain a significant amount of sexuality, or have inappropriate stereotypes about women and/or minorities. However, data collected in numerous studies indicates that the vast majority of videogames are rated “E” for “everyone.” Most public libraries do not own videogames that are rated “M” for “mature,” just as few libraries own “X” rated DVDs. Bill Sannwald asserted in his article “*Videogames in the Modern Public Library*” that, in reality, the types of videogames that are highlighted in the news are only a small portion of the array of videogames available. Sannwald cited a 2008 Entertainment Software Association (ESA) report that indicated:

- Only 15% of all games sold in 2006 were labeled “mature.”
- The bulk of all videogames are labeled as appropriate for all ages.
- 45% of these are rated “E” for “everyone.”
- 11% are recommended for ages “10+.”
- 44% were rated for “Teens, ages 13 and older.”

The most popular games are those that are appropriate for all audiences. According to NPD Market Research, videogame sales surpassed music and box office sales in 2007. Videogames are rapidly becoming one of the preeminent forms of entertainment in the U.S. Libraries that have begun to circulate videogames have, in general, reported that the public was enthusiastic about borrowing the games.⁴

Interest in Videogaming is Not Limited to Teens

Data on gamers indicates the appeal of videogames reaches far beyond teens. Hemrich and Neiburger report the Ann Arbor Library went from offering a single game tournament for teens to fifteen games, targeting all ages, including family programs. They find high school students love to play against college students. The all-ages events create a friendly atmosphere that increases the social value of the event. Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) creates opportunities for families to play together. The library has logged 700 different players who have registered for 2,800 events. Ann Arbor now offers a three-day tournament weekend each month to meet the interests of different age groups.⁵

Many business and educational applications demonstrate how seriously games are being taken. It is what patrons invest in and what they are doing. Elizabeth Danforth reported in her *BiblioTech* article that one hundred percent of MIT freshmen reported they have played games online. Businesses have found gaming applications in their training programs are far more motivating than a Powerpoint presentation and the information is internalized much faster. Doctors are using games to help patients understand their treatments and to teach visualization techniques and attitudes to help them battle cancer. Nursing homes and senior retirement communities are using Wii for exercise and to keep seniors active.⁶

⁴Sannwald, Bill. *Videogames in the Modern Public Library: The Who, Why, and How of Providing Videogames for Library Patrons*. San Jose State University. n.d.

⁵Helmrich, Erin V. and Neiburger, Eli. “Video Games as a Service: Three Years Later.” *VOYA*. Jun. 2007.

⁶Danforth.

Teen Programming is Emerging as a Legitimate Public Library Service

Most public libraries offer preschool story times. Librarians feel this programming helps meet their mission and justifies the library's expenditures. Preschool story programming typically involves many entertaining activities, but public library decision makers understand and value the learning that takes place at these programs. Programs for senior citizens are often recreational in nature as well. These types of programs, tailored to match the interest and developmental needs of the participants, using materials that are relevant to the lives of preschoolers or seniors, are fairly routine library services.

As programming for teens evolves as a public library service, there is the same need to address the interests and developmental needs of the teen group. In Czarnecki's *School Library Journal* article, she said that public library service is in the midst of an exciting revolution, because many libraries are making programming for teens an integral part of library service.⁷

Heather Wilson believes that just as librarians take teen interests into account in building teen print, audio, and video collections, there is an increasing awareness that they must respond to teen interests in borrowing videogames from the library. She pointed out in her *VOYA* article that it is very important that librarians understand teen gaming interests, both to develop a collection that supports their gaming interests, guide them in planning teen programs.⁸

Increasingly, libraries across the country are investigating the need for teen programming rooms that include use for gaming tournaments and creating special gaming spaces. Many libraries have program rooms devoted to preschool programming with appropriate designs and equipment for the preschool audience. Far fewer have space devoted to teen programs. In fact, Waupaca may be the only library in Wisconsin with a room dedicated to teen programming, with equipment such as; large screen t.v., video projector, fireplace, and kitchen. The kitchen is used exclusively for teen programming, which has a refrigerator, microwave, and dishwasher.

Why Playing Videogames at the Public Library Is of Interest to Teens

Eli Neiburger, Ann Arbor Public Library, in Michigan, explains that gamers often come to the library to play games that they own at home. They come for the social aspects and like to play games in a live multi-player mode, which they can't do at home.⁹ Ray Vignovic, Director of the West Des Moines Public Library in Iowa, explained that teens often have their own video games at home, but the library environment allows them to play their favorite games with 20 or more other gamers who share the same interests. As a result, the teens are engaged in positive socialization through library sponsored and supervised gaming opportunities. Vignovic also pointed out that public libraries are also the great equalizer of technology because teens who don't own the equipment and games can access them at the library.¹⁰ Kevin Maney made the startling assertion in his article in *USA Today* that videogaming has become such a popular culture phenomenon that not being fluent in videogames can be a social disadvantage for kids.¹¹

⁷Czarnecki, Kelly. "A Revolution in Library Service." *School Library Journal*. May 2007. 53:5.

⁸Wilson.

⁹Neiburger, Eli. "Games...in the Library?" *School Library Journal*. Jul. 2007. 53:7.

¹⁰Walker, Melissa. "Libraries Hook Teens through Video Games." *Des Moines Register*, Feb. 21. 2008.

¹¹Maney, Kevin. "Video Games Aren't Necessarily Turning Kids' Brains to Mush." *USA Today*. Jul. 13, 2005.

Why Public Libraries May Want to Consider Owning Videogames and Host Gaming Events

Kit Ward-Crixell maintains in his article *School Library Journal* that videogames break down barriers between the library and community and make the library a welcoming place for a whole new group of users. He feels the skills that games help develop are exactly what young people need to participate in a rapidly changing world of new media.¹² In a *Library Journal* article, Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler called for public librarians to acquire an understanding of the literacies of games or run the risk of rendering themselves obsolete to large segments of public.¹³

Squire and Steinkuehler said that librarians over the age of 30 may perceive instant messaging and cell phone calls as distractions and may wonder how younger people get any work done. But people raised using the Internet and having access to both information and social networks that provide relevant information find it difficult to imagine functioning without these tools. They use the tools to assure access to social networks which, in turn, allow access to both collective information and collective intelligence.¹⁴

Seth Schiesle, in his article in the *New York Times*, explained that the New York Public Library added videogames to the collection and started offering gaming experiences in 2006. They made this choice, in part, to help the library become more relevant to a younger audience. Schiesle feels that in addition to attracting teens to the library, games have a broader effect on players and can be a great teaching tool.¹⁵

UW-Madison videogaming researchers, Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler, warned that librarians can't afford to ignore gamers. They assert that games are the "medium of choice" for many people under the age of 30. They are part of a network of changes involving new media, technology, and social shifts. Game cultures blur the distinction between the production and consumption of information. Games emphasize expertise rather than social status and promote international communities. Many characteristics of games run counter to print-era institutions.

Writing for *BiblioTech*, Elizabeth Danforth stated that one of the main reasons libraries need to be offering games and hosting gaming events is because this is what the patrons of all ages are interested in doing. She believes games will be an integral part of tomorrow's libraries and tomorrow's worlds. She said games need to be on public libraries' agendas because there are worlds to discover in cyberspace and libraries need to be there.¹⁶

Elizabeth Lawley, Director of the Lab for Social Computing at the Rochester Institute of Technology, went further and explained the responsibility that public librarians have in regard to helping educate their public about the value of videogaming. She said that public librarians have a role to play in telling good, non-sensational stories about gaming that will help adults in their communities understand that games have real benefits. She pointed out that there are numerous public library sites that review books for children and teens, but that most reviews of videogames for children are written by gamers for other gamers. She called on libraries to review videogames for children and teens just as they do books.¹⁷

¹²Ward-Crixell, Kit. "Gaming Advocacy." *School Library Journal*. Sept. 2007. 53:9.

¹³Squire, Kurt and Steinkuehler, Constance. "They Research, Teach, Learn, and Collaborate. So Far Without Libraries." *Library Journal*. Apr. 15, 2005.

¹⁴Squire.

¹⁵Schiesel, Seth. "Taking Play Seriously at the Public Library with Young Video Gamers." *New York Times*. Mar. 22, 2008.

¹⁶Danforth.

¹⁷Ward-Crixell.

Videogaming Activities Can Be a Hook to Get to Hard-to-Reach Teens

Although many adults are gamers, the appeal to teens is very strong. Public libraries can use teen interest in gaming as one way to introduce teens at risk of illiteracy to the full range of materials and services the library has to offer.

Helmrich and Neiburger wrote in a 2005 article for *VOYA* about their initial efforts of setting up gaming tournaments in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They explained that teens are not going to know about the library's collection of popular music, movies, magazines, and manga if they don't come into the library. They feel libraries need a "hook" or a "lost leader" to get teens to come into the library. They said that attracting teens requires thinking outside the box of traditional library services.¹⁸ The Ann Arbor Public Library first began to use videogaming to targeted teens because they are among the hardest to reach with traditional services, especially boys.

One teen at the Ann Arbor Public Library described gaming as a "gateway drug for libraries" because they led him to try other library programs, collections, and services he would not otherwise have known about or investigated. Gaming can make passionate library fans out of groups that in past had little interest in libraries.¹⁹

In his article, *Videogames in the Modern Public Library*, Bill Sannwald asserted that offering videogaming activities or loaning videogames is likely to attract the reluctant user group to the library.²⁰ In her article for *School Library Journal*, Kelly Czarnecki said videogames are anything but a waste of time, especially for teens with poor literacy skills. She explained that often teens who need to work on literacy also need to work on their social skills, and videogaming helps with both areas.²¹

Erin McDonough, youth services librarian at the Waukee Public Library in Iowa, indicated in a 2008 article in the *Des Moines Register* that when teens come to the library to play games they are exposed to other library resources and activities. Some of the teens who initially came to play games, ended up joining the library's book discussion group.²²

Paula Brehm-Heeger, the President of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), agreed that games are a way to get teens in the door. In the *Des Moines Register* article, she said that gaming has become popular around the country because teens want to engage in technology-driven activities. Brehm-Heeger asserted that gaming events don't detract from the library's traditional role of lender of print materials. She explained that typically there are print materials of interest to teens at gaming events for players to use while they are waiting, but many of the items are checked out by the teens.

The Impact Gaming Events Have on Traditional Library Services

Squire and Steinkuehler maintained, in a second article they wrote for *Library Journal*, that half of all gamers surveyed by the authors indicated that they checked out a book from the library based on interest generated by one of the games they were playing. They suggested that

¹⁸Helmrich, Erin and Neiburger, Eli. "Video Games as a Service: Hosting Tournaments at Your Library." *VOYA*. Feb. 2005

¹⁹Helmrich.

²⁰Sannwald.

²¹Czarnecki.

²²Walker.

games could be one of the best untapped links to books that librarians have. Games often inspire interest, raise curiosity, and may even spark passions.²³

Amy Alessio is the head of Youth Services at the Schaumburg Township Library in Illinois. People sometimes ask her what teen programming has to do with the library's mission. She explains that the circulation of teen materials has gone up 70% each year since Schaumburg formed a Teen Advisory Board (TAB) and began offering teen programs.²⁴

Trevor Oakley, from the Guilderland Public Library in New York, said in a 2008 article in *School Library Journal*, that one result of offering videogaming activities was that circulation of all teen materials increased by 20%. Strategy guides for games the library owned and books on videogame design circulated heavily. Books on game development, writing for games, and books on careers in the videogaming industry also were in high demand. In 2007, only 6 video games were stolen and games generally were returned in good condition.²⁵

Videogaming Has Become a National Interest for Public Libraries

There is national interest in the issue of gaming and public libraries. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a unit of the American Library Association (ALA), now has a Gaming Interest group, *VOYA* has a regular column on videogames, and ALA Techsource has initiated an annual "Games, Learning, and Libraries Symposium."²⁶

ALA recently announced it is working with the Library Schools at the Syracuse University in New York and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana to develop a Game Lab. This will be located at Syracuse and will be a research center for the classification of game structure and the public good involved when libraries provide game programming. They will also evaluate the effectiveness of different types of gaming activities, including card and board games.²⁷

²³Squire.

²⁴Alessio, Amy. "Teen Summer Reading (and Gaming and Acting and Knitting...)" *ILA Reporter*. Illinois Library Association. Apr. 2007, 25(2), p. 31.

²⁵Oakley, Trevor. "Circulating Video Games." *School Library Journal*. Apr. 2008. 54:4.

²⁶Helmrich, Erin V. and Neiburger, Eli. "Video Games as a Service: Three Years Later." *VOYA*. Jun. 2007.

²⁷"Game Lab to Explore the Intersection of Gaming and Libraries." American Library Association. May 8, 2007.

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