

Broadening the Audience for Gaming in Libraries

“I don’t think the library has ever done anything to attract my generation,” Carol [age 56] says. “I think they’re more interested in getting kids in.”
—Beth Dempsey¹

Just as we need to be more inclusive in our definition of gaming, we also need to be more aware of the new audiences emerging. More people than ever self-identify as gamers, and more people are playing more types of games than ever before.

As noted in the first *LTR* on this subject, there are more adult women playing games than teenage boys. User populations historically neglected by libraries (20- and 30-somethings who are not parents) are also a large portion of the gaming population. Even more amazing is the number of older adults playing videogames because of the Nintendo Wii’s special motion-sensing capabilities. In fact, one of the most popular places for Wii bowling tournaments has turned out to be retirement homes, with one company (Erickson Retirement Communities) even organizing a nationwide tournament of residents at its homes.² Can libraries use gaming as an outreach tool to these populations the same way they have targeted teens? The answer appears to be a resounding yes.

Martin House, Manager of Information Services, and Mark E. Engelbrecht, Senior Library Assistant, both work at the Main Library of the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenburg County (North Carolina). In 2006, they decided to experiment with gaming for adults in an effort to determine if it would have an effect on how adults use the library. Their program and the data they collected provide a fascinating glimpse into how a gaming program aimed at adults can influence user perceptions and use of the library.

Case Study 4, by Martin D. House and Mark E. Engelbrecht

Introduction

In 2006, in light of the success of the first year of gaming, the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenburg County

(PLCMC) applied for an LSTA Innovations Grant and received \$69,000. The goal of the grant was to study whether gaming programs would attract new adult users and whether current users would better use library resources because of the gaming events. These programs were to have a multitiered approach. On the one hand, we were studying the impact of low-tech versus high-tech gaming. On the other hand, the study was to also ascertain if gaming has an impact on literacy or traditional learning. There was an added interest in the social aspect of gaming. A research firm, Praxis, Inc., was contracted to assist with data collection and analysis. The grant allowed for the purchase of \$2,000 worth of board games, twelve Alienware laptops, and numerous games and accessories. During the first year of the grant, each event included board games and electronic games. Attendance at the previous year’s console gaming events ranged between twenty-five and eighty patrons, depending on venue, and expectations were similar for the LSTA gaming events

Planning

During the planning phase of the project, it was anticipated that two events would be hosted per month: one electronic and one board-gaming event. Due to staffing changes before the grant was awarded, the events were scaled back to one event per month. Each event offered board and electronic games.

Events would also have a traditional learning component. Learning opportunities would be presented using PowerPoint presentations, educational handouts, and library materials on special themes. Four special themes were selected: World War II (or war); racing (NASCAR); history; and sports (Carolina Panthers and the Charlotte Bobcats). These themes correlated directly with the most popular gaming titles available at the time. It was antici-

pated that staff members would have ad hoc conversations with participants during the events to promote library resources. Charlotte not only hosts two sports teams, but also has a NASCAR training program at a local college. The hope was to tie in with these external organizations and to promote learning and job training.

The hardware was purchased based on company reputation and best price. Three hardware manufacturers were contacted, and Alienware offered the best price and warranty. Games were selected based on online gaming reviews, their networking capabilities, and their overall “fun factor.” Accessories such as flight sticks, mice, headphones, controllers, and steering wheels were also selected based on online reviews.

The most difficult aspect of the project was marketing. The “Gaming Zone” staff approached promotion in a very direct way, going out into the community and distributing print materials. An e-mail list was also created, and patrons were encouraged at each event to sign up. Print marketing has high costs associated with it, and the distribution of materials is time-consuming. One staff member designed professional-looking posters, which were printed in color. Staff developed relationships with local coffee bars, gaming locations, and comic book stores. An additional Web presence was created in the form of a blog, which hosts entries about PLCMC events, a calendar, and RSS feeds from popular gaming sites.

The Gaming Zone blog

<http://thegamingzone.wordpress.com>

Logistics

Materials were shipped in sturdy Rubbermaid containers and were transported by the library’s internal Shipping & Receiving department. Materials were also packaged inside protective containers or bags to keep damage to a minimum.

Staff members were given time off-desk during the day to package and prepare all materials for shipment. Each event was held from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. on the second Thursday of the month. The planning committee considered it important to have recurring events at regular intervals. Setup required about 30–45 minutes if all machines were preconfigured and the software was properly set up.

Currently one staff member was responsible for the coordination of all materials. This person also installed and re-imaged all laptops and did troubleshooting for all games. Recurring programs were extremely staff-intensive and required creative scheduling. Two staff members were responsible for promotion and used work time to go into

the community and distribute flyers. One staff member administered the blog. There was a core group of about twelve staff members who rotated on a volunteer basis to help with setup and tear-down at the LSTA events.

Board gaming was less staff-intensive, and one person was charged with the entire cadre of board-gaming events. Although overtime pay was not available to staff, all hours spent at events or gaming-related work are considered official work time, and the appropriate comp time was awarded weekly.

Data Collection & Results

The data was collected through entrance surveys that patrons filled out as they arrived at each event. Each survey asked the following questions:

- What is your name?
- What is your age range?
- Do you have a library card?
- Have you been to an event before?
- Are you a member of a gaming club?
- Zip code
- Which of the following library branches do you most often visit?
- Are you interested in participating in a focus group?

Data was also gathered from four focus groups, which included 170 patrons over eight sessions with an average of 21.25 patrons per session. These focus groups were held at participating branches where regular gaming events already took place. They were chosen as project partners because of either staff’s ability to offer assistance or interest in the project. At the three venues, average attendance was

- Beatties Ford Road Library (BFR): 27
- Morrison Regional (MOR): 9
- Freedom Drive (FRL): 32

Based on the registration survey, the participant profile was

- 84% of participants reported having a PLCMC library card.
- 37% reported this was not their first visit to a Gaming Zone event.
- 10% said that they had visited the Gaming Zone Web site.
- There was no statistical correlation between the venue and the likelihood of having a library card.

- There was no statistical correlation between the age of the participants and the likelihood of having a library card.
- The most frequent zip codes identified by participants as their residence area were 28216 (25%), 28208 (12%), and 28213 (7%).
- All of these zip codes are in economically depressed areas.
- These zip codes have a census population of 90,000.
- Of this population, 29,000 are under the age of 21–25 and 55,159 (61%) are African American.
- Overall, participants were more likely to be African American than White or some other ethnic identity, with a 5:3:1 attendance ratio.
- Participants aged 21 and older made up the majority of the players, while those 16 and younger were the second largest group.
- Reference and technology services are the most frequently mentioned reasons why patrons visit libraries.
- Focus group participants overwhelmingly indicated that technology is an important factor that draws them to the library. There was a slight variation to this outcome at the more affluent library–Morrison Regional.
- Focus group participants also overwhelming agreed that gaming programs are a good way to get people involved with the library (over 80%).

The variance with the Morrison Regional Library focus group may be due to the differences in cultural and economic realities.

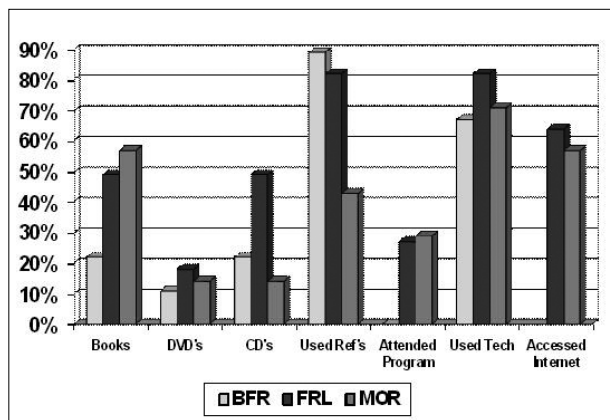


Figure 3
Bar graph showing responses to this question: "During the past month I used the following materials/services at PLCMC."

Anecdotal Information

The hard data gathered through focus groups and surveys is important, but other important information came to light through patron interactions during gaming events.

Staff noticed the following:

- Players found gaming staff more approachable outside of gaming events.
- Staff members were able to assist with reference types of questions.
- Staff members used their personal interaction to promote library services.
- Staff members noticed social interactions among various social, racial and economic groups.
- Events that are fun and entertaining build relationships with patrons.

Conclusion

Average attendance for a Gaming Zone event for adults (LAN Party or Board Gaming Night) was 21 people.

The grant was designed to study two key things:

- low-tech versus high-tech
- gaming and literacy

It was extremely difficult to integrate traditional educational elements into the gaming environment. Although possible, introducing artificial learning opportunities during an evening where patrons want to have fun and socialize was simply awkward and unproductive.

Key findings are

- Electronic gaming is much more popular, whereas board gaming appeals to a very specialized and limited crowd.
- Although elements of traditional literacy were difficult to introduce and measure during the events, there is anecdotal evidence that some attendees learned improved computer skills, such as mouse and keyboarding skills. Some games, especially *Call of Duty 2*, also required teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills. There is also anecdotal evidence that games such as *Age of Empires III* have helped broaden knowledge about early civilizations.
- The social aspects of these gaming events, although only thought of as a secondary aspect of this research, proved to be of greatest interest. These regularly scheduled events allowed attendees not only to develop their social skills, but also

to develop long-lasting relationships with library staff. Staff may not be on a first-name basis with all attendees, but all attendees know the gaming staff and feel more comfortable interacting with them and asking questions about the library.

- An additional piece of this social interaction is that staff witnessed people from different social and economic classes mingling and playing together. There may be some evidence that gaming can help bridge the gap between social and economic classes and help blur the color divide.
- There is an apparent gap between technology haves and have-nots. The research shows that while entertaining events allow patrons to socialize, the greatest draw appears to be in lower income areas where access to high-end technology is an important factor.
- There appeared to be a statistical increase in library usage by gaming participants over the course of the year.
- The single biggest reason that Gaming Zone participants cited for using the library was informational/reference requests.
- Patrons did not travel between branches to attend events. The vast majority attended events only at their neighborhood location, primarily due to financial restraints. Keeping events local and having them as frequently as possible is important to participants.
- At year's end, research indicated that the areas chosen for distributing promotional materials did not represent the target market.
- The assessment indicated that promotion, in general, had very little effect on attendance. Word of mouth was by far the most effective form of promotion.
- Web promotion had the lowest impact: 2%.

Many libraries today are focusing on becoming or being the Third Place, a community center or cultural hub for the community. While gaming is by no means the only method for making the library the Third Place, it certainly is one important component of this effort.

While every community is different and we can't assume this data would hold true everywhere, it does support findings from a recent ALA report, *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006–2007*, that for a large portion of the American population, libraries are their major point of contact with and place to use technology.³ This includes gaming that requires technology, such as online, computer-based, and console gaming.

There are many populations for which libraries serve as the central institution for learning technology, including seniors, who often require more personal help and attention during classes. When you haven't grown up with computers, the Web, e-mail, and YouTube videos, today's technology can be a daunting prospect. Recognizing this, Allan Kleiman at the Old Bridge Public Library in New Jersey explored a new approach for helping seniors become more comfortable with technology. Gaming is at the center of that approach, and so far it has been quite successful.

Case Study 5, by Allan M. Kleiman

I am not a gamer. I never have been—but even for me things are changing. Well, maybe I should rephrase that. I was a board gamer—*Monopoly* was my specialty. The neighborhood kids would spend all summer playing *Monopoly*. And, if I have to say so myself, I was pretty good at it.

Videogaming and I just were not compatible. I'd always lose, always get the low score, so I gave up on them. *PacMan* and *Ms. PacMan* were my enemies! Until I became a surrogate parent of sorts to a then 13-year-old. He moved in with his PlayStation Portable and his PlayStation 2. I still wasn't impressed. The teens from the neighborhood would descend on our house with our 55-inch screen to play their videogames. I'd look—and watch—but I really could not figure out what the thrill was! Until two events occurred.

The first was when I became the Assistant Library Director at the Old Bridge Public Library. We have an active program for our young adults, and the Teen Advisory Board purchased and donated to the library a Sony PlayStation 2 and the game *Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)*. One of my duties as the public relations person for the library was to be a chaperone for the twice-a-year lock-ins that occurred. Always included at these lock-in events was gaming for the teens. As a result, I began to see gaming in the library as a possibility. Wow, the teens really enjoyed it, and they had great fun with *DDR*.

The second event was the release of the Nintendo Wii console in 2006. Yes, I stood in line at Target on a Sunday morning to get a Wii for the Kleiman household. No sooner was it set up than I tried “bowling,” and “tennis.” I thought to myself, I could do that! I wasn't ready for long-term commitments of days and weeks playing *The Legend of Zelda*, but I thought I could try to “sport” every now and then. Or should I say, when the teens were out of the den and the “old” folks were left to keep themselves busy. And so I began to get hooked. I was playing tennis again!

While I was in the middle of these revelations, the Old Bridge Public Library developed a project called

“Senior Spaces: The Library Place for the Baby Boomers, Older Adults, the Elderly and their Friends.” It was meant to be more than just buying a few new computers and some clean furniture. It was to be a place for library staff to work with these three generations of “seniors” in a different way by providing new experiences, embracing Web 2.0 elements, and getting older adults involved in their own learning.

Last April, the New Jersey Library Association sponsored a preconference presented by gaming guru Eli Neiburger. By this time, I was already hooked on videogames. Eli is a Nintendo fanboy and a GameCube guy. I was sticking to my guns with the Wii, though. My plan after attending that preconference was to be the first library to use the Wii with older adults. None of those who attended had thought about doing gaming with Baby Boomers or older adults, so I thought that we might be breaking new ground. I joined forces with Theresa Wordelman, our Teen Services Librarian, and together we planned to be front-page news.

I chaired a preconference on “Libraries, Older Adults, and Technology” at the ALA Annual 2007 conference in Washington D.C., during which Danny Wallace and Connie Van Fleet mentioned gaming and the elderly during their presentation. The *New York Times*, no less, had an article on the Wii and older adults. It talked about the benefits of using the Wii with the elderly in senior centers and nursing homes (no libraries were mentioned) and how it could help seniors maintain eye-hand coordination and help in developing brain cells. Now, I was even more convinced that Senior Spaces had to be one of the first library projects to lead the way in this area.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2007. We had a tip that GameStop had the Wii. Theresa and I each bought one—one was to be for Senior Spaces and the other for our Laurence Harbor Branch. One of our custodians is a gamer, and he took the games out of the boxes and showed me how to set them up, and we made sure that they worked. Of course, we had to test them out as well! Yes, they worked. Now, what was going to be the next step?

Theresa and I put our heads together to look at how we would join forces on this new project. Around this same time the library hired a Coordinator of Programming Services who, yes, you’ve guessed it—was also a gamer. Our strategy was to use the members of the Teen Advisory Board and schedule a first program on Friday in November during a school break. We did not do a lot of publicity because we wanted to keep the first event small so we could see how it went and what needed to be ironed out for future iterations. Our Teen Advisory Board was given some training in how to teach the Wii to the older adults. One teen volunteered to bring in an additional Wii so that we were able to have three stations at our first event.

On the day of the event, we had ten seniors and fourteen teens, more than a one-to-one ratio.

Both Theresa and I explained the ground rules. Seniors could spend up to half an hour at each station; then they would move on to the next one. One station was to be Wii Sports, particularly bowling, one with *Wii Degree: Big Brain Academy*, and the third with *Guitar Hero III*. The teens were asked to instruct the older adults in how to use the controller and then step back and let the older adults try it.

The outcome? The older adults enjoyed the teens, and the teens enjoyed working with and training the older adults. A local paper reported on the event, and I was interviewed over the phone as a follow-up. We were blogged by gamers across the United States, and we received e-mails and calls from other libraries interested in trying this experiment with their groups of older adults.

The photograph from the event that seems to have every one enthralled is of Michael Monaghan teaching his grandmother *Guitar Hero III*, but all the older adults had a great time. One of the seniors who is visually impaired and had given up bowling years ago got a chance to bowl again! When she scored her first strike, you could hear her enthusiasm all over the library. The older adults refused to leave! This event, planned for 1½ hours, lasted 2½ hours. Before we ended the program, I had to promise to have another intergenerational game-training day, which we held in December during the holiday break.

We want seniors to feel they are part of the 21st-century library and are not left out. They should be able to snap a photo with a digital camera or surf the Internet or use the various other technologies surrounding them. Gaming in libraries is becoming more and more common, but using videogames to slowly introduce modern technology to seniors is a relatively new idea. It’s a lot less frightening to play with these than to learn how to use a computer.

We encouraged staff at all levels to come into the meeting room area to witness and participate in the day’s gaming events. They tried their hand at bowling and playing the guitar, too. This was a good technique for them to see firsthand what was going on, and several staff members have asked if this could be incorporated into our annual staff day.

During January 2008, we started a new program as part of Senior Spaces, which we are calling Technology Thursdays. The Wii will be available in the Senior Spaces area every Thursday for open play by individuals or groups before and after our technology classes. This idea was one that I borrowed from the Delft (Holland) Concept Library. We are also adding some additional Wii games for our older adults to use in the library that we think will be of interest.

Darren Miquez, the Coordinator of Programming Services, scheduled our first *Halo 3* Tournament for



Figure 4
Michael Monaghan teaches his grandmother to play *Guitar Hero III* at an Old Bridge Public Library Senior Spaces technology training event.

December 2007, and we have begun purchasing video-games and books on those games for circulation.

And so in 2007, the Old Bridge Public Library began offering gaming twice a year with little or no support. By the end of the year, we had a major project that involved using the Wii with older adults, supporting tournaments, and purchasing books and games for circulation. Plans are now underway to introduce gaming at our Laurence Harbor Branch after school and on Saturdays to attract reluctant teens to our library.

I can't really tell you how this all will turn out, or if we will be buying the most popular format for the games (Wii), but what I can tell you is that my experiences with gaming for older adults this past year were some of the most exciting days that I have spent in the library. Yes, I'm a Boomer! And I think that I'm hooked on the Wii—and especially using the Wii in the Library with Baby Boomers and older adults!

Try it and I bet you'll be surprised at the result!

The following is a list of links that you might find helpful:

Senior Spaces Web site
www.infolink.org/seniorspaces

Senior Spaces blog
www.seniorspaces.blogspot.com

"Old Bridge Library Unites Generations"
www.thnt.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071126/999999999/711260424

"More Wii Gaming for Older Adults"

<http://seniorfriendlylibraries.blogspot.com/2007/10/more-wii-gaming-for-older-adults.html>

"Nintendo at AARP Event to Court the Grayer Gamer"

www.nytimes.com/2006/10/30/technology/30aarp.html

"Games Seek to Bring Seniors to Their Feet: Nintendo Marketing the Wii in Retirement Communities"

www.boston.com/yourlife/health/aging/articles/2007/06/16/games_seek_to_bring_seniors_to_their_feet

WiiSeniors News Clip (Green Mountain Nursing Home)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sge9-ctiNAM

While much of library literature and discussion on gaming focuses on young adults and children, it's clear that there is an adult audience for the same types of services and that promote the same types of benefits—improved eye-hand coordination and other media literacies, new opportunities for socialization, and increases in library usage. While we often hear about libraries using gaming to reach the traditionally neglected demographic of teenage boys, the equally ignored group of 20- and 30-somethings may also find gaming at the library to be a reason to return. Targeting gaming activities beyond teenagers is proving to be an excellent way for a library to maximize the financial investment in equipment and staff training that many institutions are already dedicating to programming for youth.

Talking Points

- The average age of gamers today is 33 years old, and the largest group of online gamers is middle-aged women.⁴
- Offering gaming events for adults can help them feel more comfortable interacting with library staff and may increase their usage of the library, especially in lower-income areas where the library is the primary provider of computer and Internet technology.
- We have seen that gaming can cross social, economic, racial, and ethnic divisions for youth, but this appears to hold true for adults, too.

- Gaming can improve computer skills, problem-solving skills, leadership development, and socialization among diverse groups.
- The motion-sensing capabilities of the Nintendo Wii have introduced gaming to new audiences such as Baby Boomers and seniors, who have enthusiastically embraced it.
- Creating opportunities for teens to help older adults learn how to play videogames in libraries allows for socialization and reverse mentoring in a safe and welcoming environment and benefits both groups.

Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry (*report from the Entertainment Software Association*)
www.theesa.com/archives/files/ESA-EF%202007.pdf

“Top 10 Industry Facts” (*from the Entertainment Software Association*)
www.theesa.com/facts/top_10_facts.php

Erickson Sports’ Nintendo Wii Bowling Championship: Game 1
http://youtube.com/watch?v=Pzp8S_7yspM

Notes

1. Beth Dempsey, “What Boomers Want,” *Library Journal* 132, no. 12 (July 15, 2007), www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6457208.html (accessed Jan. 14, 2008).
2. “Erickson Retirees’ ‘Wii Sports’ Are the Talk of Video Web,” Oct. 11, 2007, press release on the Erikson Web site, www.erickson.com/EricksonNews/publicsite/press_releases.aspx?PRID=1400 (accessed Jan. 21, 2008).
3. American Library Association and Information Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006–2007*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 2008), p. 35; available online at www.ala.org/ala/ors/0607report/0607reportcfm (accessed Jan. 14, 2008).
4. Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry* (Washington, D.C.: Entertainment Software Association, 2007), p. 4; “Nielsen Entertainment Study Shows Video Gaming is Increasingly a Social Experience,” Oct. 5, 2007, press release on the PR Newswire Web site, www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/10-05-2006/0004446115&EDATE (accessed Jan 21, 2008).