Case Studies

Public Libraries

Worth Public Library

Of the types of libraries that have implemented gaming services within their buildings, public libraries were among the first to implement gaming-related services and programs. And these public libraries offering gaming are not just the larger, better-funded institutions (ones with line items devoted solely to gaming); many small, public libraries are innovating and finding ways to incorporate gaming into their services as well.

An excellent example of this is the Worth Public Library (WPL) in Worth, Illinois, a small library without many resources to devote to a gaming program. WPL's head of Youth Services Dan Braun—who ultimately served as the catalyst for a gaming offering at WPL and is referred to and addressed by his gamers as "Mr. Dan"—had been contemplating the idea of offering console gaming for a while, but he wasn't sure how the service would be received by staff or by the community. Braun, an avid gamer, was also concerned about legal issues, such as the public-performance rights and violating terms of service, so he tried to contact Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony. When he still had received no replies to his inquiries after several months of waiting, he began holding gaming tournaments in April 2005.[1]

The tournaments began with *Halo 2* (for the Xbox platform) and *Mario Kart* (for the GameCube platform), in part because those are the games and consoles that Braun owned. Because the library did not own any gaming equipment, Braun started the tournaments using his own equipment. "I thought it would be cool to be able to provide a safe, social environment for gamers. . . . We were hoping to draw new patrons and to boost our program attendance, and we have been very successful in accomplishing these goals. We have since made attempts to use these programs to boost our material circulation, but we have not been as successful in this endeavor," Braun noted.

In fact, the gaming program has been so successful for WPL it has been expanded and integrated into the library's summer-reading program (by implementing a weekly gaming club). This has been possible, in part, because WPL's library board was so impressed with the attendance figures and positive feedback from users, the board members authorized staff to purchase an Xbox 360.

On Wednesday evenings (4:00 until 6:00) during the summer, the library hosts open gaming. Children, ages five through twelve, are invited to bring in any GameCube game rated E or T to play. Usually, there's an assortment of games from which to choose, so Braun ends up picking three of them, and then the group votes on which game to play.

Despite the multitude of titles, the choices are usually the same. "Quite honestly," reported Braun, "*Super Smash Brothers* and *Mario Kart* ALWAYS win out, and we continue play on a winner stays on basis. Once everyone has played, I'll either start a simple tournament for fun or just keep rotating players."[2]

Braun uses other creative methods to make the gaming program more enjoyable for all of his patrons as well.

> From 7:00–8:30 P.M., my teen gamers play on our Xbox 360. I bought a monthly game pass from Blockbuster for $15, which I use to rent a new T- or E-rated game every week. Most of these games only allow for two players, so I rotate pairs of two to square off against one another until everyone has played. . . . I also keep the GameCube hooked up to a television in the

room and allow teens to play any E or T games they want. I'm fortunate to have a great group of kids whom I trust to be honest and fair with one another when it comes to playing time. . . . To this day, I have not had to ask any participant to leave because of inappropriate behavior.[3]

Although he had the full support of his director, Carol Hall, in the beginning, some staff and board members were skeptical about allowing gaming in the library. To help alleviate their concerns and to demonstrate the value of gaming, Braun held a few gaming sessions for them. The strategy has worked for the most part, persuading "even the most stalwart of gaming opponents. . . . Nobody questions their appeal when it comes to drawing crowds and getting kids excited about coming to the library," Braun stated.[4]

Even Braun has been surprised at the enthusiastic reception gaming has received from his users.

I have to say that I was surprised by how consistently we were getting huge attendance numbers. These programs have a larger draw than most of the paid performers we've hired. We have had many gaming events where the place was so packed that we had to ask people to leave so we didn't violate our maximum occupancy.

Patrons have been extremely happy with what we've been able to offer and have come to expect at least two tournaments per month. To this day, I have not received one complaint from a parent or guardian about the games that we play.[5]

Technically, the "no negative complaints" claim isn't really true—as I found out when I followed up with Braun. Because *Halo 2* is rated M for "mature," Braun limits play to children between the ages of twelve and nineteen, and he requires parents to sign a permission slip for each participant. These rules have caused two specific complaints from parents: the first was from a mother who was tired of repeatedly signing the permission slips every month, and the second was from parents who wanted the library to expand the age range for *Halo* in order to allow their children under age twelve to play.[6]

Despite the lack of funding to purchase additional LCD projectors or consoles and the limited physical space in the library, this type of success has prompted Braun to plan for expanding the program. His plans include development of an online forum, in which his gamers can share tips, track statistics, and stay current on library gaming events, and in an even more ambitious endeavor, he hopes to begin matching gameplay to local community events. For example, he would like the library to host a boxing tournament, using the game *Fight Night*, to help promote

a local youth-boxing program. He is also working with a library board member to start a youth program that will partner young library users with DePaul University students. The program will pair the young gamers/library users with college students who are studying technology and educate the youngsters about potential careers in the gaming industry.

All of this success has been an amazing return on investment for a small institution like Worth Public Library. Because Braun provided all of the equipment himself and the library already owned an LCD projector, he estimates he spent a mere $110 on the library's initial event. Of the $110 total, $60 went to purchasing prizes, and $50 of was spent on pizza and soda.

Depending on the event and the number of registrants, it can take staff anywhere from one to a few hours to prepare for a gaming event. This involves publicizing the event beforehand; purchasing prizes and refreshments ahead of time; and setting up the room and equipment the day of the event. After that, most of the staff time involved is devoted to managing the tournaments or open-play time, which can take up to four hours, especially when there is a packed room.

The amount of staff time these programs require is the *one* downside for WPL, however. Because the library's staff is so small, coverage of other library services is negatively affected when even just one person is not available due to working on or at the gaming program.

Braun recommends using standard channels to publicize gaming events—local newspapers, local television channels, newsletters, fliers, and signs in front of your library—but like pioneering librarians who have started gaming in their libraries, he notes that word of mouth is usually the most successful form of marketing. (For example, because friends told them about the tournaments, children from neighboring Indiana have shown up to play in gaming tournaments at WPL.) In addition, Braun partners with the retail store Game Crazy to purchase prizes, and he has asked Game Crazy's staff to promote library gaming events to customers.[7] (Also see the Appendixes section, pp. 68–70, for WPL's *Halo 2* tournament registration form, permission/parental release form, a press release Braun issued about the tournament, and a tournament promotional sign.)

Braun also believes that gaming is an excellent way to attract the elusive teenage male to the library. "*Halo 2* draws mostly males (I only have two girls who play regularly), ranging from ages twelve to nineteen, with a median age of about fifteen. *Mario Kart* draws a more diverse crowd, and there are usually more girls than boys. My youngest *Mario Kart* gamer was a four-year-old (who actually went to the finals)."[8]

Braun has developed a list of tips and best-practice recommendations he offers for others who want to offer gaming programs in their libraries:

- It is important to cover a rudimentary set of rules before each tournament in order to outline the basics of playing, the tournament structure, and your expectations of participants.
- Use a single-elimination tournament bracket for each event. Double-elimination brackets can get tricky if people have to leave early, and they are certainly more time consuming.
- Be flexible! Regardless of how much preparation you invest, something will always change at the last minute. Prepare to minimize potential disasters (shattered projector bulb, broken console, and so on) as best you can and have a back-up plan.
- Get patrons involved! This is something they love, and they will go out of their way to help you if they can. I use several of my older kids as announcers during tournaments, which helps generate hype during the game and keeps spectators engaged while they're not playing. The kids love being talked to about their efforts, as their competition here is as legitimate as any sport or contest.
- Do whatever you can to make the event special. Anyone can sit at home in front of a television and play games, so give them a reason to come to the library.
- Be enthusiastic and creative! Your patrons will reciprocate and provide you with a rewarding sense of accomplishment for a successful program.[9]

It could be due to the fact that Braun is a gamer, but he believes providing gaming services in the library is a great way to reach out to patrons and engage them in *other services* the library offers. His passion for the topic is evident, and he provided the most spirited and strongest arguments yet for why libraries need to be in this space:

> If we isolate libraries from gaming, we're hurting ourselves. Libraries have a chance to provide a positive social experience with the incorporation of gaming events. They can be used to promote reading programs, civic events, or just to allow your patrons a unique leisure experience.

> Many games have a story to tell, and our patrons invest themselves in that story through playing in the same way that someone invests herself in a book through reading. People write fan-fiction all the time that incorporates their favorite heroes from games and the gaming community. If this can inspire people to be creative and produce their own art, then I'm confident in its value as a medium.

> At the very least, libraries offer many materials and programs that serve a recreational function.

Gaming is just one form of recreation, and one that libraries should be using to their advantage.

> I speak with 98.4% confidence that any library can reproduce what I've done with a small investment of funds and a moderate investment of time. I don't know where I came up with that figure, but I assure you that it's mathematically sound.[10]

If a small public library can achieve this kind of success with almost no resources, imagine what a large public library with dedicated funding could do.

Ann Arbor District Library

One of the few people I have met who is more passionate about gaming in libraries than Dan Braun is Eli Neiburger, the information-access systems manager at the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL) in Michigan. Neiburger is such a Nintendo fanboy (slang for "devoted fan") that he had a symbol from Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* game tattooed on his right arm (see figure 20). Because he is so immersed in the gaming world, Neiburger has been able to spearhead the implementation of a world-class gaming program at AADL—one that few other libraries have been able to match.

In 2004, AADL youth services librarian Erin Helmrich attended two nonlibrary conferences that inspired her to approach Neiburger about doing *something* with gaming. Rather than forming a committee to investigate the idea or trying one event as a trial to see what the reception would be like, the two conceived a plan for a five-month gaming tournament. They presented their proposal to their director, Josie Parker (a strong supporter of youth initiatives), made their case, and in August 2005, began what, at the time, was the most ambitious gaming program in the country.

Their plan called for a state-of-the-art setup of eight networked Nintendo GameCubes, eight televisions, eight copies of *Mario Kart: Double Dash*, a mixing station to handle audio and video streams from the games, and a projector to display an individual stream during gameplay. In addition, the library purchased a PlayStation 2, a *DDR* game, and two Cobalt Flux dance pads in order to offer *Dance Dance Revolution* open play and tournaments (see figure 21). The hardware and software for the entire setup cost approximately $6,500, with an additional $1,500 for prize money coming from the library's Friends group. When completed, the equipment setup looked so professional that gamers thought the library had purchased it all from Nintendo.

The tournaments also represent a major investment of staff time. Neiburger estimates that AADL staff have

spent more than a hundred hours over two years developing software for registration, scoring, bracketing, and more, with another thirty hours going toward building the cabling system that holds it all together and makes it work. Setup or take down of the GameCube network takes about three hours, which is why (to maximize their time investment) they tend to hold three events at a time (tournaments or open play) before dismantling it.

A "small" tournament (about 70–90 attendees) usually runs approximately 3 hours and takes 6 hours of staff time. A "large" tournament (which can run as high as 120 people) runs about 5 hours and takes up to 30 hours of staff time. As of summer 2006, AADL had run 11 large tournaments and 27 small events, which totals approximately 500 staff hours for the setup and production of the events.[11]

Neiburger emphasizes that, after the initial setup, gaming is "just like story time—you can do essentially the same event repeatedly and the audience keeps coming back for more." More than a year after AADL launched its gaming services, the seasonal tournaments are still going strong, with new features such as "clan" (team) play being added, more prizes, and new games. AADL staff members also keep thinking of new ways to bring in more gamers, with such incentives as bonus points for those players who bring in a peer who has never attended an event before as well as a new "gender bonus," for teams that have female players. These days, one of the biggest issues AADL staff members face is *too many participants* at an event—the physical space is at capacity, so staff members cannot let them all in due to fire-code restrictions.

In addition to marketing the AADL-GT (Game Tournaments) events through traditional channels, staff members have posted fliers on telephone poles (which is legal in Ann Arbor); implemented a direct-mail campaign; had T-shirts with the special AADL-GT logo (see figure 22) produced for the gaming tournaments; offered and presented classroom talks; advertised in the newspaper; designed rubber bracelets and disseminated them; posted event announcements on fan gaming sites; and invested in a special eight-week run of movie preshow advertising (at a cost of $1750, paid for with more Friends of the Library funding). Helmrich reports that a major goal for the upcoming year is to get a local business to sponsor the pizza at the events.[12] (Also see the Appendixes section, p. 72, for an AADL poster that promotes the gaming event at which the cover image of this issue was taken. In addition, see p. 73 for a "menu" Neiburger has compiled of "VIDEOGAMES as a Service," which identifies the equipment and costs associated with implementing gaming with Nintendo's GameCube and the game *Dance Dance Revolution*.)

Recordings of the tournaments run on local cable-access channels, and the AADL staff members have even created a DVD of highlights from the first season. The

Figure 20:
Eli Neiburger, the information-access systems manager at Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan, is an avid gamer and a "fanboy" of the Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* game. He has a "Tri-Force" (a symbol in the game) tattooed on his arm.
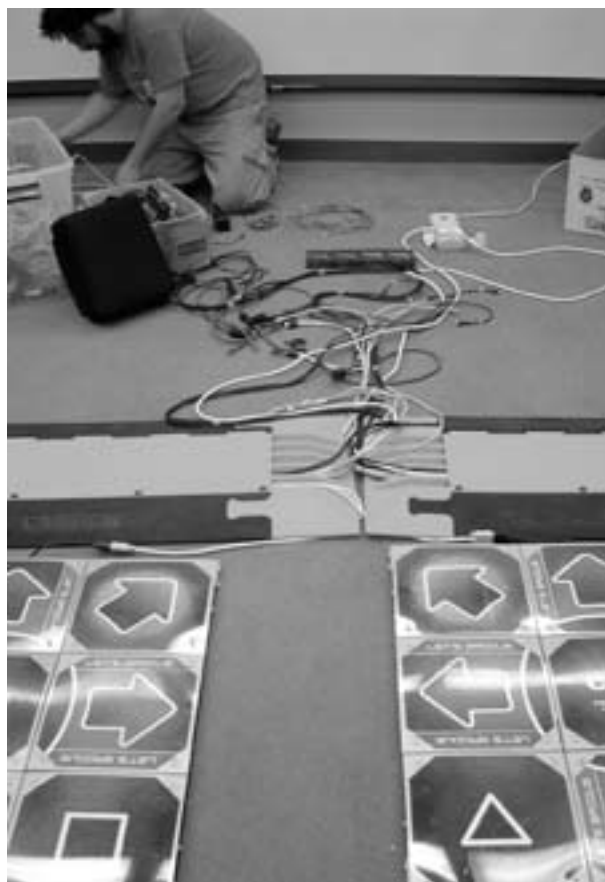

Figure 21:
Neiburger, pictured here setting up *Dance Dance Revolution* for a gameplay, reports that AADL has hosted several large gaming tournaments (eleven as of this past summer) and several smaller gaming events at the library.

championship was broadcast live, and during the second season, every round was televised. An ardent gamer, Neiburger reported he knew a gaming program could connect the library with younger patrons, but even he is shocked at how well it has been received.

> My expectations were that we would get a lot of kids in the building that had never been in here before, that they would think that the library was cool and relevant to them, and that we would be able to build a community of new users that includes staff–public interaction on a level that we don't usually attain with teenagers, especially boys (especially tough boys). We've succeeded at that well beyond my hopes for the program . . . I hear kids calling, "Eliiiiiiii" out of car windows across town. I'm talking with them on the bus, and we're seeing dedication and library fandom from them that we wouldn't have previously thought possible.[13]

Helmrich agrees, and she emphasized how difficult it is to get teenage boys just to walk into the building.

> I LOVE that I get to be the one to stand in front of an auditorium of 300 kids or teens and drop the gaming bomb. . . . I get to hear the gasps, and it's great. . . .

> The relationships and connection our teens have made with Eli and the rest of the staff cannot be underestimated. The teens have connected, invested, and started to explore the library and everything it has to offer because of the passion, fun, and importance that Eli in particular (as the gaming guru), but [also] all of us, place on what they (the teens) value.

> And that's gaming—teens are passionate, consumed, and knowledgeable about gaming and the library has recognized this and validated the importance of it to the teens. By giving them a place and by giving them a voice in how it's run, we

Figure 22:
AADL designed this special logo for its gaming services. The library's gaming events are recorded and are often broadcast on a public-access television station for the Ann Arbor region.

have made an important investment that I don't think we can even comprehend completely.

> Libraries in general are very girl friendly and the core library teens are frequently teen girls. I love that these events are so boy heavy. . . .

> Gaming is one of **the** most important content and lifestyle cornerstones of the younger generations—and this includes adults up to the age of 40. If libraries don't figure out how to embrace this population, it will have devastating results.[14]

I have found, through my examination of various types of libraries offering gaming services, that it's rare for participants at the gaming events to exhibit behavioral problems, such as fighting or overly aggressive behavior. This is likely because the kids do not want to lose the privilege of playing. Staff members at AADL reported that their library has been no exception and has not encountered any serious problems in this area. "I think what I've been the most surprised by is how little conflict we've had between players, even across economic, social, or racial lines that otherwise might not have been so easily bridged. The sportsmanship of all the players really shines through, even when they lose, and we've had several interactions that I was watching unfold, concerned they could flare up, and the common ground of gaming has just smoothed them all out. . . . The community aspect was really something we hoped for, but we did not expect it to be as pervasive as it is," Helmrich stated.[15]

Although some staff members were skeptical about the programs at first, seeing the "overwhelmingly positive atmosphere" they create has helped minimize doubts. The response from patrons, especially parents, has been even more enthusiastic. Neiburger couldn't be more thrilled. "The responses from kids and teens is jaw-drops and gasps when they first hear of it, and it's come to be described by attendees as 'the biggest event in town' and 'the highlight of my year' (and don't forget we have University of Michigan football here!). We have had no negative responses from parents, quite the reverse: we hear wonderful things from parents about how great it is that their kids are now engaged and enthusiastic about the library."[16]

Also noteworthy is the demographic breakdown of participants; Neiburger estimates that players in the *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Brothers* tournaments are comprised of approximately 95 percent boys, while *Dance Dance Revolution* is about half boys and half girls. College students make up most of the audience for tournaments advertised for eighteen years old and higher, although the ratio of women to men at these events is much more even.[17]

Overall, Neiburger is particularly pleased at how many African American teenage boys are attending the events; he noted that, in his experience, they rarely come to any library events. In addition, Neiburger said he enjoys regaling librarian audiences with stories about teenage boys lined up around the block on a Saturday morning, begging staff to open the doors early so they can get in to the library. How many librarians can say they witnessed this at their libraries, especially on a consistent basis?

Naturally, Neiburger has no shortage of reasons for why libraries should host gaming events.

> Games are content, too, and gamers are patrons, too. I think that libraries should endeavor to minimize the number of people in their service area who think that the library is irrelevant to them and has nothing to offer. Game events are a very cost-effective way to reach a very difficult audience and show them that there is a place for the library in their lives. . . .
>
> When public libraries ignore what their customers want, entire industries spring up to fill that vacuum and that business is hard to ever get back. Also, you could consider it a problem that a group of our prospective patrons thinks that we have nothing to offer them. . . . Taking content that would normally be consumed individually and making a social event out of it is a traditional library service! All that's new here is the format, and thirty years after *Pong*, I don't think you can call video games "emerging" anymore.
>
> Tournaments are to video games what story times are to picture books; anyone can check out a picture book, but we still do story time. This isn't intended to be a loss leader—it's a core service. It's also the easiest way to show you have value to an audience that doesn't feel that way. And don't forget, these are your future taxpayers![18]

The experiences at AADL support Neiburger's assertions. Specific outcomes include:

- changed perceptions of the library;
- staff members don't always have to force information on the teens now;
- the kids are using the library more in general; and
- parents are happy their kids are not passive in the library anymore.

One mother even expressed her gratitude that the library was motivating her son to get out of bed before noon on a Saturday (for a change). Even more impressive is that ***25 to 30 percent of the kids coming to the tournaments have never been to the library before***, an astounding figure for a community that has a 70-percent cardholder rate.[19]

AADL's Axis Blog
http://aadl.org/axis

"Taming the Wild Geek," Eli Neiburger's Presentation for the Gaming and Libraries Symposium (December 2005)
http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/presentations/elineiburger.pdf

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Based on his experiences running the AADL-GT programs, Neiburger offers the following best practices:

- It's important to make a decision based on the software you want to play, not the consoles you want to buy. We chose *Mario Kart* for our first season because it offered the best gameplay and a broad appeal without coming anywhere near some of the hot-button issues in gaming. So *Mario Kart* meant GameCube. Also, *Super Smash Brothers* (also exclusive to the GameCube) is simply one of the best multiplayer games available and continues to be our biggest draw. For *DDR*, we chose the PS2 because it has the largest number of *DDR* games available. Arcade *DDR* actually runs on PS2 hardware, so it's *DDR*'s home system.
- Don't just try a single event to see how it goes. Plan a series of events from the start to give word of mouth time to grow, as your target audience may never have cared what was going on at the library before and isn't tuned into your existing promotion. Make the last of that series a championship, and you've got an instant season.
- I always lead applause of all eliminated players, and we give away lots of old mugs and highlighters as consolation prizes.
- Always obtain a completed game save from a serious player of your game before your first tournament. Events without all game features unlocked look amateurish.
- Always have a set number (at least two to three) of qualification rounds before anyone is eliminated—it can be a record-keeping challenge, but the goal is to have the most play time for the most people.
- Have a way for players to see a leader board as much as possible, even if you're just projecting your spreadsheet. They will be obsessed about their position in the pack.
- Work out tournament details with a dedicated group of know-it-alls in advance whenever possible (blogs

are great for this [see figure 23]). It will avoid the "this sucks" impulse later, which, let's face it, is a teenage boy's default attitude.

- Always try to have an MC or "color" commentary. There will always be players wanting to do it once the ice is broken. It's technically unsophisticated but adds a lot of value for the players.

- Include team events whenever possible. The players will want them, and they increase the social value of the event.

- Always plan to feed your audience, and always have water at *DDR* events.

- Resist complaints about choice of game or console. "Fanboyitis" runs rampant in this audience, and odds are they'll come play your inferior hardware and software anyway.

- If possible, always turn off fluorescent lighting during a gaming event. You don't want them slipping into their school trance. (Helmrich adds, "You can always improve the vibe of your events by keeping the lights low. . . . Teens are less self-conscious in darker rooms.")

- Don't start actual tournaments less than half an hour after the published start time. Allow time for open play and late registrations.[20]

Echoing the sentiments expressed in the preceding case studies, Neiburger emphasized that all any library needs to start a gaming program, even a small library, is a willingness to do it. Helmrich is equally encouraging:

> It really comes down to passion. If a smaller library out there just taps into the excitement and the passion for gaming, they can pull it off. If they're willing to let that shelver, or technology person who knows and loves games come out from behind their designated role, or empower

Figure 23:
AADL's Axis blog provides highlights the library's gaming events and provides a forum for gamers to comment on the events (http://aadl.org/axis).

that crazy passionate volunteer, they can create what we have created. At its core, there needs to be someone who can talk the talk with the audience. Otherwise, they know you're just faking it.

> No matter what you do, just make sure you let the teens be involved in the process. With our blog and our planning meetings, the teens have been invested from the start. This will create loyalty, fandom, and can only improve the quality of the events.[21]

Bloomington Public Library

At about the same time staff members at the Ann Arbor District Library started talking about hosting gaming events, a similar discussion was happening at the Bloomington Public Library (BPL) in Illinois. BPL information technology services manager Matt Gullett and young-adult librarian Kelly Czarnecki knew they wanted to offer gaming within the library, as both believe that gaming is "where the teens are," thus that's where the library needs to be too. Administration was supportive of this philosophy, as was the Bloomington Public Library's board.

> We wanted to put a different face on the library for teens by creating a community of interest with gaming of all sorts and kinds within the local community of businesses, schools, and other organizations. The library is a place of influence and leadership, as it pertains to offering relevant cultural programming and experiences to all ages. Within that context, we wanted to offer services and programs that incorporated gaming (such as, "how to create video games" in the after-school computer club, games were added to the circulating collection, etc.) beyond having gaming events every few months. We wanted to expand what it means to have gaming as part of the library.[22]

Originally, BPL took a different direction than AADL and hosted an event using the computer game *Battlefront 1942* (with the violence toned down in the game's settings). Bloomington Public Library had previously been chosen as a "Project Next Generation" site by the Illinois Secretary of State's office and received funds to create a lab with sixteen computers, scanners, video-editing software, and more. The initial gaming events were held in this room (on the computers), although staff also made board games available and would, at various times, even show movies in a different area. Teens were free to come and go among the various forms of entertainment.

FlatCon
www.flatcon.com

BPL GameFests
www.bloomingtonlibrary.org/services/teenzone/
gamefest

"Supporting a Culture: Gaming at the Library," by Matt Gullett and Kelly Czarnecki
http://gaminginlibraries.org/2005symposium/
presentations/mattgullett_kellyczarnecki.pdf

ImaginOn
www.imaginon.org

Eventually, grant funds were used to purchase console equipment and games (*Mario Kart, Gran Turismo,* and eventually *Guitar Hero*) totaling approximately $3,500 the first year—staff members spent an additional $3,500 the second year as well—and the events were moved to the meeting room (See p. 79 for a hardware list compiled by Chuck Thacker, BPL's network manager, as well as a list of resources, pp. 77–78, on gaming—such as articles, individuals, Web sites, and academic courses—compiled by Kelly Czarnecki, formerly of BPL and now with ImaginOn in North Carolina).

Taking the lead within the community, Gullett and Czarnecki formed partnerships with local organizations and businesses to help defray program costs. The local EB Games outlet donated hundreds of dollars' worth of prizes and an Xbox kiosk, while the Bloomington-Normal Education Alliance (BNEA) donated a new set of Red Octane pads, two PlayStation 2 consoles, and two copies of a *DDR* game to what, eventually, turned into a community-wide gaming effort. In addition, these two enterprising staff members went where the gamers were by developing a partnership with a local gaming convention, FlatCon (www.flatcon.com). "The library had a great presence at the Con in the fall of 2005 and has been asked back to the 2006 one as well," noted Gullett.[23]

All of the efforts paid off, and gaming has become somewhat of a theme in the greater Bloomington-Normal area. The library began lending the BNEA-donated equipment to local groups, with one of the high schools even borrowing it for its prom party!

Gullett has stated that the rest of the BPL staff has been supportive, as have patrons. Parents have expressed gratitude that they have a safe place to bring their teens for an evening. "Some parents even drove their teen over two hours just so they could participate at the library," he marveled.

The interest from the teens was somewhat unforeseen, at least as it might pertain to the numbers and level of interest that they exhibited. According to Gullett, "We knew video gaming was big and important, but to really see how it affected the teens (lining up way before the event, coming into the library in the morning to hang out all day until the event started in the evening, etc.) was just really amazing."[24]

Early in their planning, Gullett and Czarnecki decided they would extend the program beyond just their institution of employment, and they helped arrange for joint events at the neighboring Normal Public Library, at both cities' parks-and-recreation districts, and eventually involved the area's school districts. Gullett believes this is a fundamental role libraries should be filling. "Libraries can lead and leverage the work and knowledge that they have to be community leaders. To do this, they just have to step out of the walls of their buildings and let go of their fears."

If all of this seems like a lot of work, it is. Gullett estimates that planning meetings, networking within the community, promoting an event, providing tech support, and then working at the event itself takes about sixty hours of staff time, although that was split between two people. An additional seven to eight staff members were involved and contributed varying amounts of time, ranging from fifteen hours (tech-support staff) to part-time mentors who worked approximately five hours per event.

Gullett credited at least some of the program's success to the decision to design a look, a logo, and a brand from the very beginning, all of which were used on the Web and in print promotional materials (see figure 24). (Also see the Appendix section, pp. 74–76, for examples of BPL's full GameFest program, cards, and a staff game-day itinerary.)

> We advertised with fliers (in-house and in the community—schools, game stores), although as it is with most youth/teen-oriented things, word of mouth worked best. As we promoted and pushed the fests, we began to require registration online, which then pushed traffic to our web site. With this in mind, we acquired a URL, www.bngamefest.org. The site has been through several iterations (i.e., blog, forum, etc.).[25]

BPL staff also sees a predominantly male group for gaming events, with only a third of the gamers being female. Their demographics are consistent with those of other libraries that offer gaming events, transcending racial and ethnic lines to include teens and families who are African American, Asian, East Indian, Caucasian, and Latino.

In January 2006, I attended one of the joint GameFests at Normal Public Library. I watched the staff set up for the event, watched the teens play a variety of video and board games, and listened to them applaud and thank

the staff afterwards. Of course, I was encouraged by and enjoyed what I saw overall, but there was one moment in particular when I realized just how social an activity gaming is for this generation.

As the tech-support staff members were setting up the *DDR* equipment, they ran into some problems with broadcasting the audio from the game. Those of us there for the setup could see the video being projected on the wall, and we could watch the arrows on the screen, but there was no music to dance to. The staff kept working on the problem, even as gamers began arriving. Some of the teens went off to play other games, but several stayed congregated near the *DDR* setup, waiting for the audio to be fixed.

After twenty minutes of waiting, we were sure they would become discouraged and leave the area to play other games (or worse yet, leave altogether). Instead, though, they lined up to play *DDR* anyway, just as they normally would—but without the music. Immediately, I realized that they love to play this game so much that they performed the dance steps and took turns in an orderly fashion just to be able to play, even without the music thumping away and providing contextual clues for steps.

After another fifteen minutes, staff members had fixed the problem, and the music was suddenly blasting from the speaker system. The kids cheered and even more of them lined up to play. It was the perfect illustration of how the library provided an experience these teens don't get anywhere else and how much it means to them (see figure 25).

Gullett has seen this type of enthusiasm and appreciation enough times to understand the value of gaming in libraries. He offers the following reasons for libraries to offer gaming services:

- Gaming is part of our culture as a society. Libraries should be offering programs and collections that represent the culture of a people.
- It is inherently social and creates a community that embraces the library as a gathering place for all ages.
- We have always been advocates and supporters of literacy, and gaming offers a tremendous amount of learning and literacy opportunities.
- Our business is creating lifelong learners, and gaming allows skills that can be valued in society (risk taking, competitive, problem solvers, etc.) to be improved.
- We're building assets and developmental needs through gaming programs. This is what all of our library programs strive to do.[26]

Gullett knows many libraries won't be able to replicate BPL's program, but he still believes it is important for them to do what they can in this area.

Figure 24:
Cover of a program that staff members of the Bloomington Public Library created for its GameFest events.

Figure 25:
Gamers playing *DDR* at Bloomington Public Library.

Play the games and learn the medium. If you read, listen to music, watch movies, then you should also know how to play a video/computer game. It is part of your profession. Start small and don't be afraid to go outside the library to develop partnerships. This can be a community initiative. Keep talking to people until you find someone that "gets it." Get and stay connected to other libraries that are doing gaming. Keep moving forward with it.[27]

Czarnecki agrees, emphasizing that libraries need to stop debating about whether or not games belong in libraries. She encourages every librarian to "figure out how to fulfill your responsibility to connect with the gamer generation."[28]

You can follow the Bloomington Public Library's GameFests via the Web at www.bloomingtonlibrary .org/services/teenzone/gamefest. Also, at the Gaming in Libraries Symposium (December 2005), Gullett and Czarnecki presented an overview of the BPL program, which can be found at http:/gaminginlibraries .org/2005symposium/presentations/mattgullett_kelly czarnecki.pdf.

Gullett and Czarnecki have left BPL to work at ImaginOn in North Carolina, a collaborative space that is a cross between a children's public library and a children's theatre, which spans an entire city block. As part of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, the project has specific programs dedicated to teens, gaming, and digital content, all of which fall under Gullett's and Czarnecki's job descriptions. It is the most ambitious, proactive program of its kind in the country. Read more about it on their Web site at www.imaginon.org.

Talking Points

- Kids enjoy playing games in the library so much that they will be on their best behavior just so they don't lose playing privileges. Gaming is a great behavioral motivator!
- Hosting gaming tournaments for children and teens validates their content choices, the same way purchasing science-fiction novels validates the content choices of a certain segment of readers.
- Brand your gaming events with a special name and logo if at all possible.
- Create an online forum (such as a blog or discussion board) where teens can talk to each other about your gaming events.
- When talking about *Dance Dance Revolution,* don't refer to it by its full name. In conversation, it's called "*DDR.*" If you offer *DDR* open play or tournaments, try to find the money to purchase more durable dance pads. Metal pads from Red Octane or plastic

pads from Cobalt Flux will impress gamers the most. If nothing else, two foam-filled pads can be purchased off eBay for approximately eighty dollars with shipping and handling.
- Refreshments, liquid ones in particular, are a must at a teen-gaming event.
- Matt Gullett and Kelly Czarnecki recommend serving water, rather than soda, at your gaming events in order to keep the adrenaline level of the kids—already high to begin with—in check.
- Set up special times to let your staff play, too. It will help show them the value of games.
- Gaming builds positive relationships with younger patrons and shows them the library values.
- Program gaming events on school breaks—parents will appreciate it.
- If you don't have the money to buy a more sophisticated setup yourself, consider pooling resources with a neighboring library and sharing equipment. This could also lead to regional tournaments and other collaborations.

Notes

1. Dan Braun, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 6, 2006.
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3. Ibid.
4. Braun, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 6, 2006.
5. Ibid.
6. Braun, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 8, 2006.
7. Braun, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 6, 2006.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Eli Neiburger, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.
12. Erin Helmrich, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.
13. Neiburger, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.
14. Helmrich, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.
15. Ibid.
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17. Ibid.
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19. Neiburger, Metropolitan Library System Tech Summit, May 26, 2005, www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/archives/ 2005/05/26/gaming_your_library_sessions_blogged .html (accessed September 26, 2006).
20. Neiburger, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.

21. Helmrich, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 22, 2006.
22. Gullett, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 29, 2006.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
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28. Czarnecki, response to e-mail questionnaire, June 29, 2006.