The Benefits of a Planned Approach

Abstract

When implementing a gaming program or event at your library, it is important to take a well-planned, goal-oriented approach. In order to justify using public resources for gaming, it is crucial to document the evolution of the program and the allocation of resources. This chapter looks of "Gaming in Libraries: Learning Lessons from the Intersections" at how a group of librarians in Nebraska ran into some controversy while attempting to broaden what had been a successful gaming program at one library.

I have written quite a bit about gaming on my personal blog, The Shifted Librarian, and in a 2007 post, I encouraged regional library organizations to educate their member libraries about gaming by purchasing equipment and providing hands-on sessions so that nongamer librarians could experience social play for themselves in order to make an informed decision about whether social gaming would be valuable in their own institutions.[1]

This Shifted Librarian
http://theshiftedlibrarian.com

Many regional organizations (such as the South Carolina State Library, among others) did exactly this, as did the Nebraska Library Commission (NLC). Training done by these institutions has provided great value for attendees and helped them learn enough to implement gaming in their libraries.

However, in early 2009, the Nebraska Library Commission came under fire for purchasing videogame equipment and posting a video on YouTube of staff unpacking, testing, and using it. When a Nebraska citizen reported the video to the state and complained that the NLC was misusing taxpayer money, the state auditor conducted an attestation review of the gaming purchase transactions for the time period July 1, 2007, through January 14, 2009, in order to investigate the claim.

Nebraska Attestation Review of the Nebraska Library Commission
www.nlc.state.ne.us/epubs/A9000/B422-200709.pdf

Nebraska Library Commission Response to Attestation Review
www.nlc.state.ne.us/epubs/L4000/B050-2009.pdf

Case Study 4

by Rod Wagner and the staff of the Nebraska Library Commission

We had been reading a lot in the professional literature about gaming in libraries, and we're always on the lookout for new things to demonstrate to our libraries. Librarians in Nebraska vary widely in terms of their comfort level with technology and equipment, and many of those without prior gaming experience would be hesitant to introduce gaming into their library sight unseen.

Therefore, we held gaming panels at two regional meetings in 2007—one on the eastern side of the state

in August and one in the west in early October—in which staff from five Nebraska libraries spoke about their experiences with gaming in their institutions. During the Nebraska Library Association/Nebraska Educational Media Association joint annual conference at the end of October 2007, the Nebraska Library Commission Network Services department set up and demonstrated three popular gaming systems that libraries across the country were beginning to incorporate into their programming.

Nebraska librarians responded with great enthusiasm, and we received multiple requests to demo or loan out "NLC's equipment." We were unable to accommodate those requests because the equipment used at NLA/NEMA and at the earlier meetings was borrowed from staff members and friends of staff members. In fact, NLC didn't own any gaming equipment at all.

To rectify this situation and to respond to the many expressions of interest, Network Services requested that the library commission purchase some gaming equipment so that we could offer a series of workshops around the state. The equipment was purchased in January 2008, and our first day-long workshop was held on April 17, 2008: "Get Your Game On! The Why and How of Gaming in Your Library." The whole idea was to introduce attendees to not only the *why* of gaming but also the *how*. Despite the belief that games are "so easy to set up a child can do it," many older librarians have absolutely no experience with such equipment, and they appreciated the hands-on time.

Since we held our "Get Your Game On!" workshop in April 2008, several libraries in the state have started gaming programs of their own. The six regional library systems submitted a joint grant requesting funds for each to purchase a Wii and a collection of games. The commission funded this grant and the library systems now offer

Figure 5
Nebraska librarians get hands-on experience with videogames during a NLC workshop.

demonstrations using it. They also lend out the equipment and games to libraries in their region, which has triggered a great ripple effect.

Currently we're working on setting up additional full-day workshops on gaming throughout the state. The commission may also be providing our gaming equipment for a potential Arcade Night at the 2009 NLA/NEMA annual conference as a fundraiser for the NLA's Legacy Scholarship Fund. All along, we've wanted to offer more sessions and workshops, but unfortunately other projects have taken up much of our time and slowed progress on this initiative. However, we hope to devote more time to this program in the coming year.

The Nebraska Library Commission has a central purpose in promoting and introducing new technologies to Nebraska libraries. In fact, with gaming in libraries being such a hot topic in the library profession in 2007, the Nebraska Library Commission would have been remiss *not* to offer workshops and information sessions on the topic. Few Nebraska librarians can afford to participate in national professional associations and conferences; it is the commission's role to help them stay up-to-date and current despite this limitation.

In Nebraska, the issue is capacity. Many of our librarians don't have access to national conferences and training workshops, so if they're going to be exposed to something in person, it will be through regional training like ours. Also, as the state library, if we offer training on a particular subject, it adds an element of legitimacy to the topic or activity. Ideally this helps librarians justify their own library's involvement in gaming or other new technologies to reluctant directors or boards.

In early 2009, the Nebraska state auditor conducted an attestation review of the Nebraska Library Commission, focusing on the purchase and use of our gaming equipment and on the commission's use of social networking sites to promote our services.

It was very important to us to craft a thorough and detailed response, correcting what we believed to be mischaracterizations in the initial report and providing the context and background information that was missing. We have very complete e-mail archives, including messages from staff members who were involved in the development of the program but are no longer at the commission. Never deleting any e-mails, even those seemingly inconsequential ones like "OK, I uploaded the video to YouTube," turned out to be invaluable.

As we developed our program, we openly blogged about our progress. We were able to refer the auditor to all of our posts that explained, in context, what was going on with gaming at the commission.

We had also made a formal proposal in writing to the commission director asking for the funds, and it was useful to have that to point to, since it showed that this was a well-thought-out programming initiative, not some-

thing we just pulled out of thin air for our own personal amusement. In the end, the only determination the auditor made was that the commission should not have paid the sales tax on the gaming equipment because it is a government agency.

One important tip: context is everything!

We have lots of context on our website, where we included the YouTube videos and Flickr pictures in blog posts and informational webpages about our initiative. We provided a bit of information on the actual YouTube video about what we were doing—setting up and trying out new gaming equipment for an upcoming workshop. In hindsight, I think we all wish we had provided more, but the reality is that it might not have made any difference.

We were unsure about how much of our response would be included in the final audit report. In the end, very few of our words were excerpted, so it was important to have the complete report available on our website and to provide it to reporters. One interesting observation is that, based on their reporting, it didn't appear that mainstream media read our formal response, although many of the librarian and gaming bloggers clearly did. We are also very grateful to the librarians in the state who spoke up on our behalf via letters to the editor or columns in their local newspapers.

A very nice side effect of this incident is the amount of support for libraries that has been generated. Many comments, blog posts, and letters were written that didn't even mention the gaming issue. Librarians and patrons alike took a stand for the great service provided by their libraries. The positive publicity for libraries that has come out of this is priceless.

Because the auditor did not interview librarians or research the topic, he was unfamiliar with how games and gaming apply in libraries. Further, the report he issued complained that the NLC did not need to be involved with Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. The report was a shock to both the NLC staff and to librarians in general because it didn't reflect the reality librarians face in their daily work. The report stated

> The purchase of gaming equipment is a questionable use of public funds. It is common knowledge that children enjoy games and toys, so there appears to have been little need to purchase the games. Moreover, none of the games purchased were so complicated or out of the ordinary as to require the Commission to demonstrate their use to library staff and others. . . .[2]
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> In addition, the Commission is using social websites and gaming equipment on State time and with State computers which appears to be an inappropriate use of public funds and is not in accordance with its

employee recognition policy. Finally, photos and videos are being posted to websites using State computers on State time without management's approval to ensure they appropriately reflect the Commission's image. All of this information has been referred to the Legislative Performance Audit Committee.[3]

Several newspaper articles and blog posts discussed the auditor's report, with comments supporting both sides. The commission posted a response to its own website, a thoughtful and thorough 27-page report documenting exactly what the staff had done, why, and how much it had cost. Although NLC staff estimate they've spent more than 100 hours educating Nebraska librarians and helping them implement gaming, the total amount of money spent on this project was $447.17, proving once again how inexpensive offering gaming programs can be.

When all was said and done, the biggest issues in the report seemed to be that the commission had paid sales tax on the gaming equipment (a total of $29.26), and that there were no approval procedures in place for staff uploading content to external sites such as Flickr and YouTube.

As the NLC staff was able to prove from program evaluations, the gaming workshops were very effective in training librarians. Its report successfully corrected the many inaccurate assumptions of the auditor's office:

> The audit report states that "none of the games purchased were so complicated or out of the ordinary as to require the Commission to demonstrate their use. . . ." While it's true that the games are not complicated, we also know that librarians in the state vary widely in terms of their comfort level with technology and equipment, and that many of those without prior gaming experience would be hesitant to introduce gaming into their library without any prior experience using them. Comments collected through workshop evaluations bear this out (more survey responses can be found in Appendix A):
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> - "I learned a lot about how libraries are using the gaming systems. I had no idea how they worked."
> - "Thank you! Now I know I CAN run a successful gaming program even though I have only played one day in my life!"
> - "I just didn't understand how to set up a gaming afternoon. My family didn't own a system and I wasn't familiar with any of the systems."
> - "Good to share ideas and have a hands-on. Didn't know how the games worked before."[4]

In addition, the response report went on to note that the NLC was not alone in its use of Web 2.0 sites by state agencies:

The Nebraska.gov website features an "Add This" button encouraging visitors to share the site on various social networking websites, like MySpace and Facebook. . . .

The Nebraska Lottery and the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services have Flickr accounts. The Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism both have Facebook fan pages. The Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism, Nebraska World Day on the Mall and the Nebraska Department of Roads all have YouTube channels. At the request of the Nebraska Information Technology Commission, the Nebraska Webmasters Group has formed a Social Networking Tools & Services Committee. The committee was formed to address the use of social networking services by State of Nebraska entities for the purpose of broadcasting agency news, marketing its products or services to the public, or just expanding its contact base.[5]

After further meetings and questioning, no further action was taken by any state entity, and during the NLC's budget hearing, the legislature's Appropriations Committee didn't even ask questions about the audit. In a nice aftereffect, many of the popular nonlibrary gaming blogs such as GamePolitics and Joystiq openly supported the NLC, strengthening ties between gamers and libraries. While this audience may have been traditionally underserved in libraries, they strongly expressed their support for library gaming programs, a position ALA hopes to build on in the future.

GamePolitics
www.gamepolitics.com

Joystiq
www.joystiq.com

Lessons Learned

- As with any project, when implementing a gaming program, it's important to have one or more goals in mind and a plan to achieve them. Experimentation is important, and test events can be extremely helpful in assessing future directions, but sustainability requires planning and direction.

- It is important to document decisions, actions, and events to provide context so that you have a history of what you've done that you can build on to plan where you want to go. Context helps you explain your program if others question it.

- These lessons apply to use of social networking sites too. It's good to offer library content and services off of your own site where users already are, but make sure you provide context there as well, so that users get the full story.

- Communication with all possible stakeholders is critical when starting new programs. Include a communication plan that speaks to various constituencies to which your organization is accountable.

Notes

1. Jenny Levine, "Still More Reasons to Offer Gaming in Libraries (and the Value of Play)," The Shifted Librarian, Nov. 28, 2007, http://theshiftedlibrarian.com/archives/2007/11/28/still-more-reasons-to-offer-gaming-in-libraries-and-the-value-of-play.html (accessed April 20, 2009).

2. Nebraska Auditor of Public Accounts, "Attestation Review of Nebraska Library Commission: July 1, 2007 through January 14, 2009," Feb. 24, 2009, www.nlc.state.ne.us/epubs/A9000/B422-200709.pdf (accessed April 20, 2009): 5.

3. Ibid., 10–11.

4. Nebraska Library Commission, "Response to the Auditor of Public Accounts State of Nebraska Attestation Review," Feb. 17, 2009, www.nlc.state.ne.us/epubs/L4000/B050-2009.pdf (accessed April 20, 2009): 4.

5. Ibid., 4–5.