

Gaming as Fundraiser

Abstract

In addition to providing more social opportunities for families to game together (in much the same way libraries provide social opportunities around books), libraries can take advantage of gaming activities to do some fundraising. This chapter of “Gaming in Libraries: Learning Lessons from the Intersections” explores Rick Bolton’s Library Mini Golf Program, which started as a project to raise money for libraries that had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and blossomed into a portable model for library fundraisers and community building through gaming.

In a 2008 survey by Sony Entertainment Online that was published in *Family Circle* magazine, 87 percent of mothers reported playing videogames with their children.¹ Family videogame play is increasing, as is family gaming in general.² In addition to providing more social opportunities for families to game together (in much the same way libraries provide social opportunities around books), libraries can take advantage of gaming activities to do some fundraising.

A relatively new opportunity for this type of activity is Library Mini Golf, an idea Rick Bolton started in the fall of 2005. Bolton is part of the Trumbull Library Foundation, which was searching for its precise mission, when inspiration struck:

During the extensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, news stations aired reports from Gulf Coast libraries caught in the path of the storm. Someone suggested that instead of holding an event to benefit our library, we stage a “Gulf event” to raise money for hurricane victims. Another Foundation member misheard the idea and responded, “Golf event? Count me in!” By

the time the confusion cleared, the words “Gulf” and “Golf” were inextricably linked, setting in motion perhaps the only charitable event ever generated by a verbal typo.

The Foundation considered and rejected the idea of an outdoor tournament. Winter was coming on, and we wanted something that would showcase the Library and emphasize the library-to-library spirit of this project. Then it occurred to us: why not build a miniature golf course using the stacks, reading areas and ramps as fairways? We broached the idea with Trumbull’s head librarian Karen Ronald (since departed to Fairfield, CT), half-hoping she would talk some sense into us. Instead, she threw her full support and boundless enthusiasm into the project, even locating the library in Waveland, Mississippi that would benefit from whatever money we raised.

At the first event, almost 500 people came to play, and we raised more than \$10,000, all of which we sent to the Waveland Library which had been completely destroyed by Katrina.

As of April 5, 2009, there have been a dozen Library Mini Golf events that we have hosted in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Iowa and we have more than a dozen events planned for the rest of 2009 around the country. We’ve started a separate organization that helps libraries run these types of fundraisers in their own institutions. We hope to scale our resources up to eventually be able to host 80 to 120 events a year and our goal is to have cumulatively raised \$1 million for libraries by the end of 2010. Our most important objective for every event is to provide a fun day for the community at the library that showcases the entire facility while raising significant funds.³

Case Study 5

*by Christopher Bowen (Director,
Downers Grove Public Library)*

Rick Bolton and I had a phone conversation in September 2008, which convinced me that I wanted to try a library mini-golf event at the Downers Grove Public Library (DGPL). I ran the idea past my assistant director and our PR staff, and everyone was as excited about the idea as I was, so I contacted the library foundation president and told her about it. She liked it immediately, as well. Staff and the foundation board president brainstormed about the best time to hold the event. Since the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays were fast approaching, we determined that sometime in early 2009 would be best.

We also considered the timing of the library newsletter (every other month) for PR purposes and other events scheduled in the community, including the high school sports season. We didn't want competition for the teens that we hoped would attend a mini golf event. Sunday, March 8 appeared to be the first really good date for our event. There were no major conflicts with other events in the community. It was late enough in the winter that we weren't likely to be hit with a blizzard that would keep people away, but early enough in the spring that people would still be interested in indoor activities. We presented the idea to the foundation board at their meeting on October 8, and it was approved unanimously with great enthusiasm.

In November, Rick visited the Downers Grove Public Library to see the building and get ideas for the layout of the course. We have a very prominent main stairway, which Rick spotted immediately. He designed a hole that began with the tee on the first landing where the ball entered a pipe, then rolled to the green at the bottom of the stair-

way. It was the perfect segue from the front nine on the second floor down to the back nine on the first floor.

Patrons were delighted with the idea from the moment they heard about it. We had two holes on display in the library for three months before the event. They sparked a lot of questions, and everyone who asked about them loved the idea.

Library PR staff worked with the foundation to put together a schedule that began promoting the event in November, with the intent of attracting potential sponsors looking for a deduction on their 2008 taxes and continuing into January and February for sponsors who might be looking for 2009 deductions. This all took place just before the financial market collapsed and the economy went into a tailspin.

We saw this as an annual event from the beginning, so the initial cost of acquiring the course was considered an investment for the future. (LMG has since moved to a leasing model. LMG rents the clubs and colored golf balls and sends a representative to oversee the setup of the course and help guide the library through the actual day of the event.) Although we initially saw our event as a fundraiser, we quickly adjusted our expectations based on the reality of the economy and the impact that we saw on Downers Grove. For this initial event, our hope and expectation was to break even on the cost of holding it. The Downers Grove Public Library Foundation has two main goals with its annual fundraiser. One is to make sure that residents are aware of the foundation so that they consider it for donations at tax time and when doing their estate planning. The second goal is to promote the library itself. We felt that the Library Mini Golf event would accomplish both of these goals.

Working with LMG, we turned the library into an eighteen-hole miniature golf course, with nine holes on



Figure 6
DGPL Mini Golf logo

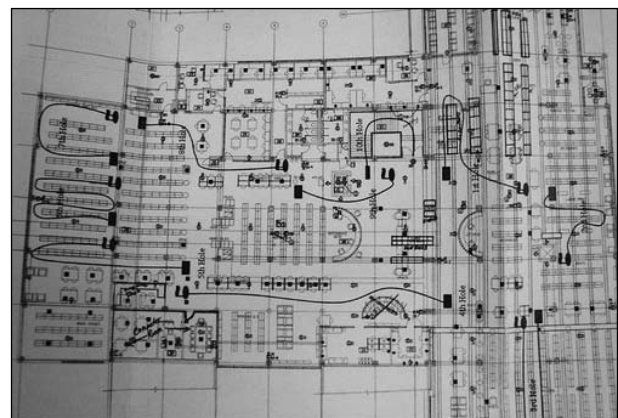


Figure 7
The course laid out across the upper floor of the Downers Grove Public Library.

each of the two floors of the library. The library provided a floor plan, and LMG plotted the course, e-mailed a draft to us, and was responsible for construction of the course. We walked the course and tweaked it a little for the final version.

The course was delivered a few days before the event. We had six volunteers who met two LMG people at the library at our 5:00 p.m. closing time on the Saturday before our Sunday event. Most of the course was set up by 7:30 p.m. The two LMG people came back at 8:00 a.m. Sunday to complete the setup in time for the 11:00 a.m. opening.

The course ran through both adult departments and the children's services department, using the aisles between the stacks and other areas for the fairways. Players actually toured all of our public spaces during their play. Every golfer received a coupon for a cup of ice cream that was served in the library meeting room by a local ice cream shop. The foundation paid for the ice cream, although the shop gave us a discount and provided the servers. Our normal Sunday hours are 1:00 - 5:00 p.m., but we opened for Mini Golf at 11:00 a.m. Regular library services were not available until 1:00, but we did staff all of the service desks by 12:30 so that we could let people in if they arrived a little early to use the library, rather than make them wait outside until the 1:00 opening time.

For the most part, the course was laid out so that the tee for the next hole was clearly visible from the green of the hole before. In a few cases, the next tee was around a corner or otherwise out of sight, so we stationed guides in these locations to direct golfers to the next hole. We also had "floaters" whose job was to help as needed anywhere



Figure 8
A staff member shelves returned items during the event.

on the course. Since the aisles between the stacks were the fairways, some patrons needed help to get over the bumpers or course obstacles to get to the library books on the shelves. Fairways did go around corners in some spots, so we stationed observers at the turns to let golfers at the tee know that the green was clear and that it was OK to begin the hole.

Golfers were invited to turn in their scorecards if they were interested in being called back for the final playoff tournament at the end of the day. The sixteen best scores were invited to compete in a nine-hole match to determine the winner of the tournament. The prize for the winner was a \$50 gift card. A number of players submitted their scores, and we held a full tournament at the end of the day. Three players tied to make it into the final round for the tournament—one adult and two teenagers—and it wasn't until the last hole of the playoff round that one player finally pulled ahead of the other two.

It was funny to see a number of regular library users browsing the shelves, apparently oblivious to the golf balls rolling past their heels. One long straight fairway ran about 40 feet, with the magazine lounge area on one side and a row of public computers on the other. Patrons used both areas while golfers putted up the fairway between them. Overall, I think it's great that the non-library users who came to golf got to see how heavily used the library is.

We did seek sponsorships for the event from the local business community, though these were scaled back considerably from the original plan. By the time we started actively soliciting sponsorships in early December 2008, the economy was in a great decline and businesses were already suffering from the drop in holiday spending. It was a terrible time to ask people to donate money. Some other organizations in the area had already canceled fundraising events because they could not attract enough support, but the foundation was determined to go ahead with Library Mini Golf.

We approached the local merchants who had supported foundation events in the past, but without much luck. Most said that they just could not afford it. A local community bank and a new restaurant did sponsor holes, and we tried people we had never asked before. For the first time we approached vendors with whom the library regularly does business. Foundation board members also approached their personal contacts, and ultimately almost every green and tee were sponsored, albeit at a reduced rate. Most sponsors had never sponsored a library event before, so we have a nice list of potential supporters for the future. Sponsors were named on the scorecard and had a poster displayed at their hole or green. We also provided a small table next to the poster in order to display brochures from the sponsors, some of whom decorated their holes with quite elaborately.

Since this was a fundraising event, golfers were charged \$5 (adults) and \$3 (children under fifteen). No



Figure 9
Families play Library Mini Golf at the Downers Grove Public Library.

one appeared to have any problem with that ticket price, especially when they learned this included a free cup of ice cream for each player.

The visitor count (by electronic counter) for the day of the event was 2,192. A typical Sunday count for March is around 1,500. We didn't start counting the number of paid golfers until the beginning of the third hour of the event, but based on the count for the rest of the day and the amount of money we took in, we estimate that 300–350 people actually played golf.

We expected that this event would bring people of all ages into the library and that it would be fun for everyone, and our expectations proved accurate. We had golfers of all ages including many teenagers. There were a number of family groups, including a number of fathers with their children—perhaps a benefit of holding the event on a Sunday. We also saw quite a few adult groups, including a few very serious golfers. Everyone appeared to have a great time, and we received lots of positive feedback. Many people specifically said they hoped that the library would do the event again.

Pictures of Library Mini Golf at DGPL

www.flickr.com/photos/dglibrary/sets/72157615037249165
and
www.flickr.com/photos/shifted/sets/72157615571105626

We heard comments from several groups of teenagers such as, “I haven't been in the library for a long time. This is great!” This type of positive response from what we consider the hardest age group to get into the library

was wonderful. What was completely unexpected was the fact that several patrons who did not play mini golf gave donations to the foundation on the spot! The best thing about this event is that it attracted people of all ages. There were lots of children (even very small ones), teens, and adults. Senior citizens were probably the minority, though there were some groups of grandparents and grandchildren.

The ice cream vendor was set up in the meeting room, and many golfers ended up sitting at the tables and visiting with each other while they ate their ice cream. We hadn't anticipated mini-golf becoming an ancillary social event, and we actually had to ask people to leave when we secured the building at the end of the tournament.

There is real potential for LMG to be a good fundraiser for the foundation and library, and we see possibilities for additional fundraising activities. In the future, a gift basket raffle might be very successful; we can imagine things like a teen-only golf event in the evening of an “open” golfing day. Alternatively, we might offer a formal evening golfing soiree, a meal or wine and appetizers with advance reservations, and a higher ticket price. When we repeat this event, we may schedule tee times during the first hour of the event that can be reserved in advance for a higher fee. Several serious golfers mentioned that they would like that opportunity.

As far as costs go, LMG negotiates the price of the event based on the actual funds raised, so the sponsoring organization doesn't have to provide up-front money for leasing the course can be assured that it won't lose money. Our only up-front costs were for whatever advertising we chose to do and the printing of the scorecard. We advertised the event in our existing newsletter, which is mailed to every household, so the only extra expense was for posters that we placed in almost every business in the area advertising the event. The foundation did pay for small advertisements in the local newspapers, as well.

DGPL has a trained PR person and a graphic artist on staff, and part of their regular duties is to promote foundation events. These staff members created the posters, the letter, and the sponsorship form that were sent to potential donors. They also coordinated the process of gathering sponsors' logos and sending them to LMG, who prepared the scorecards and donor posters. Administrative staff helped solicit business for sponsorships. Foundation board members also solicited sponsors and invited friends and neighbors to participate. Foundation board members did donate money to sponsor one hole that we did not receive a “regular” sponsorship for. If a library has a foundation board or friends group that is willing and able to handle promotion and solicitation of sponsors, there would be no need for staff involvement beyond the time of the event itself. In the future, we would probably look at more ways to publicize the event in local high schools, since many teens that came appeared to have a great time.

I truly believe that any library could do this event. LMG provides the guidance and support that a library needs. The only thing the library has to do is approach sponsors and provide a handful of volunteers to set up, hold, and break down the event. We'll definitely do this again!

The Library Mini Golf group has created a structure that shoulders most of the work for these events, thereby making it possible for any size library to offer this type of program. Bolton is eager to work with other libraries to replicate the success LMG and its partners have seen to date, and he continues to refine the process with each new event:

LMG's revenue-sharing model ensures that the expenses are covered by the funds raised during the tournament and helps every library realize most of the revenue from these events. We take responsibility for delivering a custom-designed course to each library, managing the setup and breakdown of the course, and helping the event go smoothly. LMG is in the process of expanding our capability in directly helping libraries with the fundraising process by developing a full marketing kit that guides them through the best practices that have worked for other libraries. We are also actively working toward gaining a few national sponsors that will lessen the burden to find local sponsors for each event. We don't allow our clients to incur out-of-pocket expenses that aren't fully covered by the revenue.

Based on client feedback and other considerations, we offer only a "lease" model, because libraries were concerned about owning and storing the course for a once-a-year event. The lease model allows us to continually upgrade the course, without worrying about affordability to the library. We have arranged for low cost shipping and storage, which makes leasing even more affordable. We recommend starting the process about 12–15 weeks before the date of the event in order to allow enough time to line up the maximum number of sponsors to make the event a success for everyone.

Just watching the children's faces on hole #10 at the Downers Grove Public Library as their ball went into a tube down two flights of stairs and in for a hole in one was enough for us. At other events, we have been very encouraged by how many people attended who obviously hadn't been in the library for years. When you see teenagers marveling at the banks of computers and middle-aged men commenting about not knowing libraries had books-on-tape that could be checked out for free, you know you're helping libraries re-connect with important constituent groups.⁴

Lessons Learned

- Family gaming events are becoming increasingly popular at public libraries and can be harnessed to help raise funds for the library.
- Gaming can be utilized as a fund development technique as well as a service or program.
- Engaging other local groups and businesses in a gaming program can create a stronger program and a greater sense of community.
- Bringing in gamers helps them reconnect with the library and learn more about what you have to offer them.

Notes

1. Scott Alexander, "Video-Gaming with Your Kids," *Family Circle*, Nov. 1, 2008, posted on Parents.com, www.parents.com/family-life/entertainment/gadgets-video-games/video-gaming-with-your-kids/?page=6 (accessed April 21, 2009).
2. Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," www.theesa.com/facts (accessed April 20, 2009); Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2007 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data*, June 2007, p. 4, www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2007.pdf (accessed May 8, 2009); Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2006 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data*, May 10, 2006, p. 4, www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2006.pdf (accessed May 8, 2009).
3. Rick Bolton, e-mail interview by the author, March 22, 2009.
4. Ibid.