

Getting Started on Videogaming Events

Get Support Before Starting Videogaming Services

Kelly Czarnecki said in an article for *School Library Journal* that librarians who serve youth need to help other staff, board members, and the general public understand the value of gaming. Just as readers must start with simple books that are of personal interest to them before they can move on to more sophisticated literature, gamers must start on simple games that are of high interest to them before moving on to games that can teach more sophisticated gaming and life skills. The games teens are most interested in and that are appropriate for them are not necessarily “serious” or educational games. Just as a wide range of fiction is appropriate in a library, a wide range of games is also appropriate, including those that are primarily entertainment.¹

Julie Scodato is the Teen Services Specialist for the Columbus Metropolitan Library in Ohio. In her 2008 article in *Public Libraries*, Scodato explains how to get started with teen gaming programs, including how to build support. Scodato recommends involving IT or other interested staff who may not normally work with teens and getting buy-in from the library board. She suggests a good way to start is with pilot programs on a small scale.²

In his article, *Game Time With Mister Raroo*, Bill Sannwald says that librarians often start by writing up a vision, background information on gaming, benefits, potential costs, and plans for staff training.³ Aaron Schmidt writes in his article for *School Library Journal* that involving teens and interested adults also builds community support for the library’s ownership of videogames and of gaming events.⁴

Beth Galloway, Massachusetts Metrowest Regional Library System suggests partnering with local schools or community organizations or businesses. Co-sponsoring events can help defray the cost of the equipment, enhance marketing efforts, and build community interest and support.⁵

Justifications for Videogaming in the Library

Scodato argues that playing video and computer games is a routine part of teens’ daily media use that may involve the Internet, video-console games, cell phones, and handheld games like Nintendo DS and Sony PSP.

Scodato explains the following benefits of providing electronic gaming opportunities for teens.⁶ Gaming at the library:

- is an opportunity to build teen participation.
- can help make the library an authentic member of the teen’s social network.
- makes the library not just a place to “get” things, but also a place to “be.”
- is appealing enough to draw teens to the library from all the other activities that compete for their free time and attention.
- is a cost effective way of offering teen programming because after the initial investment in equipment there are relatively few ongoing costs.

¹Czarnecki, Kelly. “A Revolution in Library Service.” *School Library Journal*. May 2007. 53:5.

²Scodato, Julie. “Gaming as a Library Service.” *Public Libraries*. Jan/Feb 2008 pp.67-73.

³Sannwald, Bill. “*Game Time With Mister Raroo: ‘Games In The Modern Public Library.’*”

⁴Schmidt, Aaron. “Are You Game? Thanks to Electronic Games, Attracting Teens has Never Been Easier.” *School Library Journal*. June 1, 2006.

⁵Schmidt.

⁶Scodato.

- requires minimal set up and preparation, once a location for the equipment is created.
- is universally attractive because interest in gaming crosses ethnic and socio-economic boundaries.
- offers opportunities for socialization and friendly competition.
- motivates teens to interact cooperatively and in positive ways with library staff.
- encourages teens to behave, not only on gaming nights, but in general when they are in the library, to assure access to the gaming equipment.
- encourages mature teens to model appropriate behavior for younger teens
- gives teens a chance to demonstrate how the equipment needs to be set up and help the younger kids or seniors learn to play the games and improve playing strategies.
- allows non-teen staff who help out with the gaming events come to see the teens in a very positive light.
- helps teens develop a sense of community.

Scordato mentioned the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets for Adolescents to help tie what the library is doing into the larger community goals for teens, including positive peer influence, adult role models, cultural competence, and self-esteem. In a 2007 *VOYA* article, Erin Helmrich and Erin Eli Neiburger explain that videogaming meets 17 of the 40 “developmental assets” identified by the Search Institute as important attributes communities must have to help teens become contributing members of society when they are adults.⁷ The positive outcomes of library gaming events include:

- Caring neighborhood—The gaming events are inviting and relaxing.
- Community values youth—Teens are involved in planning and organizing the events, and gaming activities have led to bonding that crosses cultural, economic, and racial divides.
- Youth as resources—Teens offer color commentary during the tournaments, describing the action and who is leading.
- Set boundaries and expectations—The games must be organized and run fairly.
- Provide adult role models—Teens who participate see library staff as adults who share and respect their interests.
- Provide opportunities for positive peer influence—The tournaments encourage fair play and good sportsmanship.
- Set high expectations—Knowledge of the games is required and respected.
- Constructive use of time—Tournaments help turn a pastime into a more constructive use of time and help parents understand the interests of their teens.

Tournaments also address some of the Search Institute’s “internal assets.” Getting kids into the library for tournaments has results in many positive connections, more engagement in the library, and increased use of its resources. The gaming events address these internal assets:

- Reading for pleasure—Reading materials are always available during tournaments for use as players wait for their turns.
- Positive values—Teens model their love of the game which becomes a bond between players.
- Social competencies—Teens develop social skills and have a sense of control knowing their input will be respected.

⁷Helmrich, Erin. and Neiburger, Eli. “Video Games as a Service: Three Years Later.” *VOYA*. June 2007.

- Positive identity—When the library sanctions gaming, the community comes to see gamers as engaging in positive activities which lead to a positive identity for the gamers.
- Personal power—Leadership roles help give teens a sense of personal power.
- Self-esteem—Self-esteem is enhanced for teens because of their gaming knowledge and ability. Kids who might otherwise function on the fringe of their peer group can become valuable resources for mainstream kids. Games are the great equalizers because they don't depend on athletic, artistic, or academic accomplishments which are most frequently valued in school environments. Access at public libraries eliminates the difference between the kids who have the games and equipment at home and those who don't.
- Positive view of personal failure—Failure in games has no repercussions for the real world so kids feel they can always try again and can track their own improvement.⁸

Library directors and boards are often concerned about the start-up costs of new services. In his article for *School Library Journal*, Aaron Schmidt points out that if a library chooses to purchase its own gaming console the investment is often similar to the cost of a performer for a children's or family program. It may be a better investment because the equipment can be used over and over.⁹

Another reason libraries can justify the investment in videogames and equipment is that libraries act as equalizers for the teens who don't have their own equipment and programs. Bill Sannwald points out that many teens who want to play the newest games come from families that can't afford to buy them or the systems or accessories needed to play them. The teens who are often the most interested in videogaming are often reluctant readers, who have historically been very difficult to get into the library.¹⁰ Kevin Maney makes the startling assertion in his article in *USA Today* that videogaming has become such a popular culture phenomenon that not being fluent in videogames can be a social disadvantage for kids.¹¹

Sannwald also says that research is beginning to show that teens who initially come to the library to participate in gaming events, extend their use of the library and explore other resources and attend other types of teen programs. Teens often help other patrons learn to use and improve their play on the games. Sannwald points out that some libraries have seen a need to host adult-only and family gaming nights because teens are not the only patrons interested in gaming. Some libraries are purchasing Wii equipment to use with their outreach services to nursing homes and housing for senior citizens.

Suggestions on How To Start Videogaming Events

To get started, Erin Helmrich and Eli Neiburger of the Ann Arbor Public Library in Michigan, recommend having teens bring in their own consoles, TVs, and copies of their games. This is one way to get started without the library having to make an investment. If the events turn out to be wildly successful, it will be easier to get the director and library board to buy in to the concept of the library owning its own equipment and games.

In their article for *VOYA*, Helmrich and Neiburger suggest that libraries pursue sponsorships and request donations. Other community organizations may be willing to collaborate to get gaming going at a public library because they are interested in providing youth with positive

⁸Helmrich.

⁹Schmidt.

¹⁰Sannwald.

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

activities in a supervised environment. Co-sponsoring tournaments for games like *Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)* might be possible between public libraries and park and recreation departments. The authors encourage librarians to tap into local gamers and techies to get the expertise needed to get started. In his article for *School Library Journal*, Aaron Schmidt says that some libraries ask teen gamers to serve as a Game Advisory Committee.¹²

To enhance the experience, Hemlrich and Neiburger suggest hooking the games to an LCD projector to project them on a large screen or wall. Also, use of a mic and sound system allows teens to add color commentary of who is ahead, what weapons they are using, and other vital information such as when the refreshments will arrive. Software can be used to administer registrations, set up tournament brackets, tabulate scores, and post results.¹³ Aaron Schmidt agrees that projecting game action onto a large screen or wall makes playing especially fun in a public library. This larger than life live action aspect of gaming is not something that kids can easily do at home. He says a “thumping” stereo system hooked up to videogames with the use of either RCA cables or digital optical cable, adds a “wow” factor to them as well.¹⁴

Suggestions on Games and Gaming Systems

In her *VOYA* article, Heather Wilson suggests that the following are the most popular gaming consoles:

- Xbox
- Sony PlayStation 2 (PS2)
- Nintendo GameCube
- Nintendo Game Boy Advance (GBA)
- Wii

Wilson also explains that videogames typically fall into various genres. Action games involve using speed or power to reach objectives. Some have movie tie-ins. Adventure games involve gaining abilities by finding items and completing quests. Driving games involve players racing each other to a finish line, often avoiding obstacles or completing demolition-type activities. Puzzle games require players to solve challenging puzzles and can require careful placement of playing pieces or the collection of items. Role-playing games (RPGs) involve completing a task or quest, but the characters gain abilities through experience. They are often played online, and involve multiple players, sometimes thousands at one time. There are numerous non-electronic role-playing games.

Simulation games provide an opportunity to set up situations for their creations to react to or for the player to direct their character’s actions in response to changing situations. The military uses simulation games extensively, but there are many medical simulation games. Some sports games are simulations as well.¹⁵

Bill Sannwald agrees in his article, *Game Time With Mister Raroo*, that librarians are often confused by the various systems and platforms, as well as not knowing which games to purchase. However, videogame magazines and websites provide a great deal of guidance with reviews and other information.¹⁶ Many libraries interested in starting a collection of videogames begin by

¹²Schmidt

¹³Hemlrich, Erin and Neiburger, Eli. “Video Games as a Service: Hosting Tournaments at Your Library. *VOYA*. February 2005.

¹⁴Schmidt.

¹⁵Wilson, Heather. “Gaming for Librarians: An Introduction.” *VOYA*. February, 2005.

¹⁶Sannwald, Bill.

contacting a library that already has experience. Sannwald suggests that another way librarians can find out about good platforms and popular games is by asking the teens who already use them. Trevor Oakley's article in *School Library Journal* includes information on the top 25 best circulating videogames of 2008.¹⁷

Marketing Gaming Activities to Teens

Word of mouth is one of the most effective marketing techniques librarians can use to reach teens. Helmrich and Neiburger share that some libraries post fliers on telephone poles and put them in teen-related businesses such as comic shops and sub sandwich shops.¹⁸ In his article for *School Library Journal*, Aaron Schmidt mentions the success Marianne Kruppa, St. Joseph County Library in South Bend, Indiana, has had with efforts there at offering videogaming events. Kruppa said gaming events grow exponentially as teens tell their friends. The events in South Bend attracted significant numbers of teens. Kruppa suggests marketing include small cards that describe the event that are placed around the library and other places teens frequent, rather than anything that looks like a bookmark. Blogs can also be very effective ways to market to teens.¹⁹

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¹⁷Oakley, Trevor. "Circulating Video Games." *School Library Journal*. April 2008. 54:4.

¹⁸Helmrich. "Hosting Tournaments at Your Library."

¹⁹Schmidt.