

Games in Libraries

By Richard W. Boss

Games are an important part of the lives of children and young adults, especially computer and video games. Computer games are games played on a personal computer. Players use a mouse and keyboard to interact with the game or a special input device such as a steering wheel, flight joystick, throttle control, or gamepad. Video games are games played on a dedicated game-playing device called a console. Depending on the design of the console, the games can be displayed on a small screen on the console or on a television monitor.

Personal computers tuned for game performance are far more powerful than any console, but they are more expensive, require more technical skill to use, and lack the portability of consoles. Video games, therefore, outsell computer games by a substantial margin.

Some 250 million computer and video games were purchased in 2004 at a total cost of more than \$11 billion. That makes the computer and video game industry larger than the movie industry. The primary market for computer and video games is young people under the age of 21.

Marc Prensky, the author of “Digital Game-Based Learning” [New York: Paragon House, 2004] , estimates that the average college graduate has spent less than 5,000 hours of his or her life reading, but twice that many hours playing video games. Librarians are concerned that gamers read so little, and that they do not visit libraries as often as older generations. In the hope that adding games and providing game playing opportunities in libraries will bring young people in and, once there, may look beyond games, a number of libraries have built collections of games and have provided the equipment for using them in the library. A small number of libraries have

sponsored game playing competitions.

Issues

A number of issues need to be addressed in deciding whether to provide games and game playing competition in libraries:

Are games and game playing consistent with the goals of libraries?

If libraries select and purchase books to entertain and educate, games and game playing should achieve the same goals. There is no argument that games entertain, but there is controversy about their educational value. One reason for the controversy is that there are many poor quality games; another is that game playing can become addictive. The consensus of research into games and game playing is that computer and video games played in moderation can help young people develop mental skills that will serve them well in adult life. The pace of computer and video games make game players more perceptive, training their brains to analyze things faster. The problem solving that is an element in almost all games requires managing multiple objectives at the same time.

John Beck and Mitchell Wade, authors of “Got Games,” [Cambridge, Harvard Business School Press, 2004] surveyed hundreds of young business leaders and entrepreneurs and found that nearly all shared one thing in common: a set of attitudes and behaviors traceable to their childhood immersion in video games. Some of these include a willingness to take risks, a strong interest in exploring innovative and offbeat approaches to problem solving, and the flexibility needed to multitask and play multiple roles in an organization.

If one accepts these arguments, computer and video games should be acquired for the collection and game playing competitions should be undertaken.

What should be the target audience?

There are an estimated 90 million game players in the United States, the majority of them teenagers. An estimated 77.5 percent of teenagers own a video game console and a majority also have access to a PC or Mac that can accommodate computer games.

Younger children are interested in games, but they usually come to libraries with parents who direct them to books as well as games. Many adults are also game players, but they tend to be moderate in their activity. It is teenagers who make up the vast majority of active game players. It is also teenagers who are the most difficult to attract to libraries. If the goal is to increase the number of visits to the library, the teen audience should be the primary target.

What role does gender play in game playing?

The consensus among researchers is that while boys and girls can be equally skilled at using computer and video games, boys are much more likely than girls to play with them after grade five. There is disagreement about the reasons for the gender rift. There is a common perception that computer games are boys' toys. While it is true that most games' content is geared to the interest of boys, that does not address the question of whether games specifically selected to appeal to girls will be as heavily used as games specifically selected to appeal to boys. If games are included in the collection, care must be taken to include games that will appeal to girls.

Collection Development

Given the number of violent computer and video games on the market, parents appear to be more likely to raise issue about the content of computer and video games in libraries than other media. The National Institute on Media and the Family (www.mediafamily.org) launched a major campaign in 2005 against games that advance players on the basis of the number of people killed by the players. The Institute has a membership numbered in the hundreds-of-thousands.

Collection Development should utilize the ratings of the Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB) for each of the categories. The ESRB's rating scale is:

EC=Early childhood content for ages three and older

E=All ages content for ages six and older

T=Teen content suitable for ages 13 and older

M=Mature content for ages 17 and older

A=Adults only content

Almost all computer and video games include an ESRB rating.

It is not enough to rely on the ratings. Content should also be examined, especially in the action/adventure and war categories. It is in these areas that violent content is most common. Other categories that are popular are sports, role playing, and strategy—categories in which violent content is less common.

Computer and video games are priced at \$5 to more than \$200 each. The major producers of computer games are Nintendo, Sega, and Sony; the major producers of video games are Nintendo, ATARI, Sony, and Activision. Computer and video games are widely available on line at a discount.

Lending Games

Most of the libraries that have added electronic and video games to their collections lend them much as they do books, CDs, DVDs, and videos. The most common loan period is one week. While most libraries with computer and video game collection provide equipment for use in the library, it is uncommon for libraries to circulate consoles for playing video games away from the library.

Major Game Vendors

Online vendors with major inventories of computer and video games include www.amazon.com; www.gamestop.com; and www.ebgames.com/

Equipment Requirements

Computer games can be run on most PCs and Macs; video games require consoles such as the Microsoft Xbox, Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation2 (PS2), Sony Playstation3 (PS3), Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP), Nintendo DS, Nintendo GameCube, or the Nintendo Game Boy Advance (GBA). Prices range from \$125 to more than \$200. Many games have been developed for a specific console; therefore, it is necessary to purchase several different consoles if patrons are to be given the opportunity to use video games in the library.

Major online vendors of video consoles include www.ebgames.com, www.ncsx.com, and www.therage.com/

Game Playing Competitions

A number of libraries have undertaken game playing competitions, competitions in

which library patrons --almost always teens—are pitted against one another. The competitions give game players something they cannot get at home: competition that is face-to-face, rather than with faceless persons over the internet. That appears to be very popular, especially with teens.

The typical competition is one hour in length and may consist of teams as well as individual players.

The experience libraries have had with these competitions suggests that they be kept local, rather than allowing patrons to participate in online competitions on the internet. The argument is that anonymity does bad things to people.

The experience of the Ann Arbor District Library in hosting a game playing competition is detailed in Erin Helmrich and Eli Neiburger’s “Video Games as a Service: Hosting Tournaments at Your Library.” *VOYA*, February 2005, pp. 450-453. [VOYA is the Voice of Youth Advocates, a magazine serving those who serve young adults. It is available at \$29.95 per year from Scarecrow Press at journals@rowman.com]

Sources of Information

An important source for the history of games is J.C. Herz’s “Joystick Nation: how Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired on Minds,” Boston: Little Brown, 1997.

A useful article on game playing in libraries is Heather Wilson’s “Gaming for Librarians: An Introduction,” *VOYA*, February 2005, pp. 226-229.

The most important article on gender and game playing is Denise Agosto’s “Girls and

Gaming: a Summary of the Research with Implications for Practice,” *Teacher Librarian*, vol. 31, no. 3, February 2004.

Game Informer, a monthly magazine, is a good source of reviews on new games and articles about games. It is priced at \$19.98 per year. Information is available at www.gameinformer.com/

Computer Games Magazine, a monthly magazine that is available both online and in print, is priced at \$24.97 per year for a subscription that includes CD-ROMs of demos and \$19.97 for a subscription without. The URL is www.computergames.com/

PC Gamer, a monthly magazine with a CD-ROM of demos, is dedicated solely to computer games. It is priced at \$24.95 per year. Information is available at www.pcgamer.com/

Conclusion

Anecdotal evidence suggests that offering games and game playing competitions will bring more teenagers into the library, especially boys. There appears to be a modest increase in the use of books when a library offers games and game playing competitions, especially when it promotes a tie in between a game and related print materials.

Prepared by Richard W. Boss, July 11, 2005; revised August 25, 2005