Platforms for gaming – what are the options?

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Most technological developments are driven by the seven Gs: **G**ambling, **G**ames, **G**eodata (where you, or someone or something else is), **G**enealogy, **G**irls (pornography), **G**ood health (medicine) or **G**uns (military and defence). When a new technology is marketed or upgraded, many purveyors of content and services in these seven areas quickly evaluate any income opportunities.

Therefore, it's not a surprise that digital games are available on many devices and technologies, many of which were not designed for this form of entertainment. Though some aren't useful within a library context due to cost, flexibility, or because the display cannot be seen by more than one person, it's still handy for librarians who facilitate game use to be aware of the full range of platforms.

The PC

Yes, there is the Xbox, Play-station and Wii, but there's also the humble PC and the laptop. Including the historical catalogue, the PC has the widest range of games of any digital platform in history, though quality and compatibility issues compare unfavourably with game consoles.

Many PC games are for children, and can be found online. A subset of these are known as 'Edutainment', offering learning potential through 'fun', though see the notes about 'Gamification' below.

The Mac also has a (small) range of games, possibly for hipster owners to play ironically.

Handheld consoles

There are two contemporary handheld games consoles. The Nintendo 3DS is a dual screen system offering 3D vision without glasses (best tried in games shops rather than explained), as well as Augmented Reality in some games. The Sony PS Vita has one screen. Of the two, the 3DS has a larger range of games suitable for public library patron use, and offers some built in social gaming and functionality.

However, older handheld consoles provide a formidable range of games, with both hardware and software often being cheap. One low-cost option is to facilitate a mobile gaming

Gaming

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evening, where patrons bring along their own devices and find and play against other patrons.

E-book readers

As the Kindlification of reading continues, it may surprise many to learn that the Kindle and Nook not only provide textual content, but are also platforms for games. The range is small and the games mostly simplistic, but they're an extra form of content offered by this type of device.

As reading devices increase in screen resolution and display functionality, it is inevitable that the range of games will multiply. Soon, you may be able to switch between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Call Of Duty Killzone 5* on the same e-book reader.

Smartphones

Mobile phones, even with crude displays, have previously provided games such as *Snake*. Modern smartphones, especially the iPhone, offer a much wider and complex range of games, often cheaply or free. *Angry Birds* is probably the most well known; there are also multiplayer games.

Tablets

The lush, touch-sensitive, screens of thin, keyboard-less devices such as the iPad provide a splendid gaming environment. Though tablet games are often cheap, the high prices of the hardware make them less suitable for libraries.

The television

Since the advent of textual page options, primitive 'path' games such as Bamboozle have been offered through Teletext and Ceefax, and their derivatives. A few such still games exist, though these are basic and also difficult to find amongst the other digital textual services.

Other devices

Other platforms for game play include the back of headrests on planes; digital watches; gaming and quiz machines in pubs and bars; arcade machines; gambling machines in betting shops, and all manner of digital toys, for players of any age.

This isn't the way technology was predicted to evolve. In the 80s and 90s, there was much excited rhetoric of 'convergence', where a small number of devices would offer every functionality. Instead, we seem to be in 'digital duplication' hell, where each new device has a camera, games, WiFi or a video player obligingly included.

A driver for the multiplication of gaming options is 'Gamification'. This is not a new concept, previously derided in the games research community as 'Chocolate-covered broccoli'. Gamification is adding a digital game layer to an otherwise onerous task, in an attempt to make it 'fun' or more palatable. However, this often results in a poor, pointless and time consuming game, whereas it would have been better to make the underlying task more efficient.

At this point, you are permitted to wail 'Where will it all end?'.

Author's choice

From contemporary devices, I would choose the Nintendo 3DS handheld console, more for its Augmented Reality uses than the 3D, and for the choice of games, some of them multiplayer. From historical devices, the Atari 2600 console (but gloss over *ET*), the ZX Spectrum computer (*The Hobbit*, *Manic Miner*, and everything by Ultimate: Play The Game), and the Astro Wars handheld game from 1981, stand out.

Devices for reading and gaming.   Photo: John Kirriemuir