

Video game events – making your library relevant to new patrons



John Kirriemuir is a researcher into geocaching, digital games and virtual worlds in teaching, learning and libraries.

john@silversprite.com
www.wordshore.com



The worst thing a kid can say about homework is that it is too hard. The worst thing a kid can say about a game is that it is too easy.

– Henry Jenkins

Many public libraries in the USA, and some in the UK, hold video game, board and card game events. But why? And how?

Why hold a gaming event?

Gaming is a cognitively stimulating social activity. It brings communities of people together, fostering discussion and strategy development, to play against each other or in collaboration against other teams or the game. A considerable mass of independent research points to literacy and numerical development through gaming, as some genres and titles enforce a challenging level of reading, comprehension and calculation.

Games events are a good 'fit' in the portfolio of activities offered by public libraries, hence their popularity. They bring existing and new people into the physical building, subtly overturning 'just old books' misassumptions about what the library – and the staff – offer.

People with similar interests meet in a safe, friendly, environment. And, similar to the fiction section in the library, gaming can lead to greater literacy. Enjoyed riding the dragon? Check out some Anne McCaffrey titles over there. Lost the Xbox football tournament? Try some soccer manager biographies to see how they were successful.

New patrons equals new borrowers, equals a higher circulation. The more 'used' a library service is, the more essential it is to the community it serves.

And playing games is, like reading, a safely enjoyable activity for most people.

How?

The key factor for a public library games event to be successful is for the organiser(s) to be familiar with, and preferably players of, video games. As many adults are digital game players, it should not be a problem to find librarians, or responsible people connected with the library, to run such events. Players will also usually be aware of misassumptions¹ about games, and know which genres and titles are popular with particular demographics.

Decide on your target audience. It does not have to be exclusively teens or youths. As with reading, game playing crosses all demographics and age ranges.

Gaming

The latest news
on games in libraries

Children from about a year upwards are increasingly capable of independently comprehending and playing games on tablets and the PC, while handheld consoles loaded with cognitive games such as 'Brain Training' are popular in people over 80 years of age. Family, and parent-child game playing, has obvious social benefits ('the family that plays together, stays together'). Seniors living in retirement homes have turned out to be enthusiastic players of motion games such as bowling.

Do not buy the 'latest' console for your event. In fact, the newest is best avoided, as consoles take a few years to develop a wide portfolio of games. See what local libraries and organisations can lend. Arrange for people to bring their own (make sure you have enough power sockets). Older handheld and TV-based consoles, such as the five-year-old Nintendo Wii, are still good for gaming and relatively cheap.

Which genre?

Unless it is a specific gaming title tournament, try and provide titles from several genres. Sports, racing and puzzle games can be good. Check independent reviews in places such as metacritic² beforehand. Adventure and quest games can also be compelling and highly literate. However, check how much time a game takes to finish, so interested attendees have a chance of playing several games during your event.

Encourage participants to play genres they have not tried before.

In the same way that trying a new genre of book can be challenging, then rewarding, so people used to just Solitaire or Bejeweled often find they enjoy new types of games. One-off events are good, but a weekly scheduled event can bring in new patrons who will become comfortable and familiar with the library over time.

Physical exercise is, of course, good – but living in a country with long work hours and frequent rain can limit opportunities. Though some elements of the reactionary press perceive technology and gaming as a physically sedentary activity (while strangely turning a blind eye to reading a book), consoles such as the Nintendo Wii and Xbox with Kinect provide games where the player has to move. These range from gentle bowling and golf, to exhausting full body workout fitness games. No expensive gym membership required.

Set simple rules for your event. When it finishes and everyone goes home is the most important. Players must respect property and other players. Food can be ok; drinks, with electricals, not so much. But don't be onerous; you want the library to have a welcoming, not a restrictive, aura so the gamers come back.

Further reading

For librarians planning their own event, internet searches provides details of many e.g. at Crediton³ and Tiverton⁴ libraries in Devon, Neilston in Renfrewshire,⁵ or the Wii Bowling for Seniors league in New York.⁶

Two books by librarians, *Gamers... in the library?!*⁷ by Eli Neiburger and *Everyone Plays at the Library*⁸ by Scott Nicholson, are also recommended reading for event organisers.

References

- 1 ALA Gaming Resources wiki: <http://bit.ly/zgKj7J>
- 2 Metacritic game reviews: <http://bit.ly/3j9Si>
- 3 Crediton library news: <http://bit.ly/zRD7bD>
- 4 Tiverton library news: <http://bit.ly/zVZlkc>
- 5 Search for Neilston in: <http://bit.ly/wd6a4P>
- 6 Wii Bowling for Seniors league: <http://bit.ly/A5r3wx>
- 7 *Gamers... in the library?!*: <http://amzn.to/y0hqJp>
- 8 *Everyone Plays at the Library*: <http://amzn.to/yVNCrK>



Trying out Nintendo games, in Los Angeles.

Photo courtesy of John Kirriemuir.