Incorporating Games in Libraries

Olivia Shelton

Murray State University

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Katherine Farmer

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of gaming in all libraries. It aims to show what different libraries around the world have done to incorporate games in their circulation. It examines the different needs based on the size of the library and the community each serves to better inform other libraries interested in starting a collection. The article reviews some of the issues that arise when starting a collection and how to address those concerns when starting a new project. It also reviews what steps are needed to add games into catalogs to circulate. The article concludes with reflections for future programming and ideas since games are a continually evolving material format.

Incorporating Games in Libraries

Libraries across the world are constantly adapting their services to meet the needs of their community. Technology is something that is ever changing and evolving at what seems to be alarming rates. The relevancy of libraries, because of this evolution, comes into question in more ways than one. Libraries are the information hubs of their communities, and where a diverse population is served. This means that libraries must provide a variety of services to meet the needs of most every individual. Games are something that have started to enter the library community in a noticeable way. Although some may argue games are a thing of the future, they have been present in libraries for a long time. Resurgence of games comes from the popularity of video games and online gaming. Some will argue that there is no place for games in libraries because it is a place of learning. Games have many educational factors that cause players to use different problem-solving skills to win. However, the library cannot appeal to all persons especially, those who would normally be intimidated by the library, if they do not include materials that are "abnormal" to the collection. Games entice a new group of individuals to use library services and introduce them to the things they would normally oppose. Games also create a sense of community because they invite several people to engage with one another to compete or solve the object of the game. These are all things libraries strive to create and provide for the community with their missions.

The purpose of this article is to inform libraries about what it takes to start a gaming collection in their library, and the reasoning behind games' importance. By reviewing what other libraries have done, librarians can start to think of ideas that would work for their individual libraries. The literature review will also encourage libraries to think of games positively instead of negatively, to consider the

possibility of adding games to the collection, and to look toward future of what libraries can provide for their communities.

What Does the Word Game Mean?

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2020) defines "game" as, "a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to each other." Many associate the term with video games due to their popularity and influence in society, but game refers to all types, such as board games, card games, online, etc. Scott Nicholson (2013) defines gaming as, "the act of playing a game," and gamers as "someone who plays games" (p. 342). These are also terms that have developed a connotation of being related to videogames. Libraries can incorporate each type of gaming into the library to appeal to the different types of gamers.

History of Gaming Programs

Records show that chess is the oldest gaming program in libraries dating back to 1854 in a San Francisco public library (Nicholson, 2013). This means gaming in libraries has been around for almost two-hundred years. Games like "Chutes and Ladders," "Life," and "Mansion of Happiness" were used to teach morals to children and adults (Nicholson, 2013). Libraries have found a way to make games relevant to their collections, and it is not difficult. The issue arises when employees or patrons have concerns with the incorporation of games, or any new technology and its benefits. One patron in New Rochelle, New York was banned from the library for playing chess because it was not something the institution allowed (Nicholson, 2013). A group of individuals could be excluded from library services because they do not feel welcome. Although libraries have evolved from kicking patrons to the curb for playing games, resistance still exists for the inclusion of board games and video games as teaching tools or community outreach. Another gaming program in 1974 hosted by New York Public Library, was a contest where patrons could participate and create their own game (Nicholson, 2013). This is something

that current libraries have started doing or could do to lure those patrons who normally would oppose entering a library. That same year, a woman donated her vast card game collection to Yale University because she wanted others to be able to learn and enjoy the games that had been a major part of her life. This is one of the oldest existing collections of games in a library (Nicholson, 2013). This means that eventually the library could house these cards in special collections for patrons to enjoy for years to come.

Lycoming College in Pennsylvania created a game for their library instruction course. The game was titled *Secret Agents in the Library* which used "Macromedia Flash and was hosted on the library website" (Synder-Broussard, 2010, p.22). This allows for students to have less fear in navigating the library, by creating a program that allows them to access the information in a fun way. Synder-Broussard (2010) says, "an important element of *Secret Agents in the Library* is the integration of a fictional story with learning objectives. A simple narrative turns a simulation into a game, it makes the activity fun" (p. 24). Libraries can follow a similar path and create simple games, like a scavenger hunt, or puzzle to help students feel comfortable with the library and better comprehend the information being presented to them. The game can include many real-world materials because it would be played in the library at a specific time. The students must search for a specific title, locate it, and find the code within before they can continue with the virtual game on the website (Synder-Broussard, 2010). This allows for a more positive view of libraries and how to access information. The students are engrossed in beating the game so that the intimidation of the library processes seems less prominent. This is a way that games can be introduced into a library if the idea of adding board games, or video games seems to be overwhelming.

The Orange County Library System created several gaming programs for their libraries to see which would be most effective or well-received. The first program they designed was mobile gaming carts that did not need much attention from library staff. The pods were allowed for use in the library

and anyone with a library card could check the cart out. However, they used a token system which

allowed the patrons to play using up to two tokens a day totaling thirty minutes (Broadening Gaming

Services in Libraries, 2008). This type of program allows library staff to be available for assistance if

other patrons are in need. The games are set up so that the patrons can play on their own without

supervision, and their time will be monitored based on the token system. The cost of this may be the

only issue because this means purchasing a pod, video games, and their consoles. Another program they

created was community partnership based. The libraries hosted community members who made video

gaming into a career. This allowed the library to show teens they can make a career out of gaming. They

had several of these programs, the first, focusing on how the community members made their love of

gaming into careers, and the third, explaining how the teens would have to pursue a similar career

(Broadening Gaming Services in Libraries, 2008). Libraries have similar programs all the time where they

host a specific community member to inform the public of what they do and how. This could be another

beginning point for libraries to introduce gaming into circulation. Academic or Public libraries could host

a career event that discusses several different types of careers including gaming. This allows for the

libraries to avoid purchasing games immediately, and the speakers would be allowed to bring their own

if they preferred as demonstration. This would entice members of the community that otherwise would

not normally visit the library, introduce them to the library, and its vast opportunities. The Orange

County Library System also hosted a contest for the teens to design their own video game. The teens

learned there is "more to gaming than just staring at a screen" (Broadening Gaming Services in Libraries,

2008, p.26). The participants learned what it took to create a game, and they used their interests to

make something new. The library is still a source of learning and knowledge through this, but in a way

that is less intimidating to those who do not enjoy traditional learning structures. The library system

asked teachers for help in researching games for the collection in advance, and to find curriculum-based

content. The teachers even created a gaming blog to discuss what they were using in their classrooms

for non-traditional teaching methods (Broadening Gaming in Libraries, 2008). Academic libraries might be the ones more interested in taking this approach when adding games to their collections. Students may not have as much time to visit the library and play a board game, but if it uses content to teach them information about their classes, they may be more apt to visit. This is a way a library can collaborate with teachers or the community to find what will succeed in their collection.

The University of Minnesota's library, Briggs Library, hosted a game night one Friday every month. They choose to stay open late to host this event. Blodgett (2014) states, "we also wanted to give students the chance to see the library and its librarians in a different light" (p. 51). This means that patrons normally unattracted to the thought of being in a library, might change their ideas of what a library is. They can see the librarians as fun and friendly, and the library as a place not all about being strict and quiet. The events also help reach out to other organizations on campus and make stronger relationships with those who otherwise may not coordinate with the library on certain programming. Briggs recognizes that they could not support a large collection of games in different platforms, because they are a small library. The library was aware that other places on campus already had places where students could play video games, so they opted for a focus on the use of tabletop games (Blodgett, 2014). It is important not to overwhelm library staff with the use of multiple gaming platforms if there are not the resources available. The library also made a good decision not to incorporate gaming platforms already available for student use on campus. The Briggs Library operating after normal hours meant there must be library staff there to host the event, so the staff created a rotational schedule, that each librarian signs up for to work the game nights each month (Blodgett, 2014). This ensures that there is enough coverage at the circulation desk and to help with any questions that arise. The Briggs Library also has activities that coordinate to events happening on campus like Zombie make-up, speed dating, scavenger hunts, etc. Some of the librarians also suggest possible activities and are the ones who will work the night their event is being hosted (Blodgett, 2014). This is something that each library can do to

either connect to other organizations of a campus, or to their community. Be aware of the events taking place around the community and campus and see if the library can be connected in some way. Blodgett (2014) notes, "Some of our ventures are more successful than others, of course" (p. 52). This will happen with any event that a library will host. The day may not be one that patrons can attend, or the event may not be appealing to enough students. This is how each individual library determines what to keep and what to get rid of for future events.

Benefits of Games for Patrons

Games can help students in several ways in their daily lives. Many want to believe that games are harmful to students, but most normally have this idea with video games. Tabletop games carry a different connotation; however, some may still argue their relevance to knowledge and presence in any library. Alvarez (2017) states, "the goal is for students to adapt these learned skills and dispositions, and then apply them to their education, extracurricular programs, and social lives" (p. 42). Learning skills is not something anyone normally thinks of when playing a board game. They are just for fun, right? The board games such as Monopoly or other traditional games normally are as they only require a player's luck and not necessarily strategy. The more modern games are different though, such as Agricola (Alvarez, 2017). These games allow students to work together and not against one another, and they also can end up with different results. "Besides being a social experience, tabletop games can serve as intrinsic educational tools that tap into students' needs, and interests inspiring them to find motivation in applying new knowledge to their academic work" (Alvarez, 2017, p.42). This means learning is coming from a game, and therefore worthy of being in a library if one needs that justification. It also means that students continue to think about these games even after they are finished. The players are learning strategy and how to solve the challenges of the games (Alvarez, 2017). This normally leaves all players on an equal playing field, and feelings are less likely to get hurt because of a game. The games also allow players to be confident in "their own unique strategic methods" because there is not a specific way to

win the game (Alvarez, 2017, p.43). This also encourages patrons to visit the library more, which is a win-win.

There are other ways libraries can advocate for gaming based on benefits as well. Ward-Crixell (2007) says they are "encouraging interaction with the environment and other players" (p.36). This means that patrons are learning social skills by interacting with others. Patrons that may not have many friends or have problems socializing can benefit from board games because they are interacting with other players, and potentially building friendships. Games in "Big Fun, Big Learning: Transforming the World Through Play" uses the city which the library is in to promote education. Players are set out into the community to find clues through a scavenger hunt, and they must interact with employees of each place to move on (Ward-Crixell, 2007). Players learn more about their communities and interact with members they otherwise may never have encountered. It is not intimidating to the players because it is set up in a game.

Games being used as educational material is not a new concept, but it has grown in interest as of recent. Lipschultz (2009) argues that, "Games can support our shared mission of helping our patrons become more informed participants in an information-based society" (p.41). It seems almost silly not to incorporate games into a library with them easily following most missions set out by a library. Many teachers have started incorporating games into their curriculum to aid in student learning. Many games, although not designed for educational use, easily follow the guidelines of curriculum in different schools. Librarians can work with the teachers to find games aligned with state curriculum and feed the minds of their patrons (Lipschultz, 2009). The patrons most of the time will not realize there is an educational purpose behind the game, but they will leave with a greater knowledge of a concept than before. This can also help those patrons who need more of a hands-on experience to understand certain curriculum that may otherwise have gone over their heads. A public library even allowed teens to become teachers to older patrons through gaming events. They signed up to be instructors of certain

games and were selected by a few librarians. These teens were then taught how elderly people learn, and adapted teaching skills because of this program. The teens then taught elderly patrons how to play different video games. The turnout was great, and all the patrons had a wonderful time (Lipschultz, 2009). A gaming program like this helps to educate multiple age groups all with the use of games.

A library in South Carolina purchased several consoles for a new branch to encourage students to use other library services. The library was close to a school where the illiteracy was high, and the hope was to encourage the students to be involved with the library (Kirriemuir, 2006). Many kids avoid the library due to a disinterest in reading or the stigma that libraries are quiet places. By incorporating games, the library can be transformed into a new image for the community's younger generation. The library also housed gaming events over the weekends which the turnout proved successful, but no real data was collected on whether those patrons went on to use other services within the library (Kirriemuir, 2006). Other libraries have created games for teaching library information. The Fletcher library created a game that "will simulate the complex processes of selecting, using, and evaluating multiple sources of information within a library setting" (Kirriemuir, 2006, p.67). This could be useful for academic libraries who teach many students how to use their online resources.

Another way that libraries have led programs is through community involvement. Libraries can connect with student or community organizations to reach a variety of people for the gaming events. It also generates more assistance in the production of each program and create new connections for the libraries for future events or support (Hill, 2016). Gaming clubs can also be implemented into libraries to provide another outreach to patrons who are interested in meeting others in the community who have similar interests. Specifically, younger males who often are underserved at the library because of their interests (Hill, 2016). Local businesses that sell games and systems can also be another source of collaboration for libraries. These businesses can provide games or consoles for programs and potentially help with the program as well. By asking for help from these businesses, it gives an avenue to advertise

the program as well in their establishment (Hill, 2016). It is important to libraries to provide unique

services for a diverse community, and games are a way to incorporate a wide interest. Libraries are

constantly looking to the community for collaboration, support, and advertisement. By reaching out to

businesses and organizations, more programs in the future or possible donations can be accrued

through the connections made. Games can bring many people together and provide long lasting

friendships that otherwise may have never happened.

Advertising Gaming Materials and Programs

It is important that libraries are proactive in publicizing their collection and specifically their

programs. Patrons will not know to attend a program if it is not properly advertised. For academic

libraries, it is better to host a gaming program at the beginning of the semester. This way students can

become more comfortable with the library is a fun way (Blodgett, 2014). It is important that libraries

choose a time in which the most patrons are likely to attend. In a public library weekends, certain

holidays, or breaks may be the best time to house these. It also might be effective to have it at the same

time every month so that patrons are aware this is a service that regularly goes on. Advertising the

program enough in advance is important so patrons can be prepared to attend if interested and

potentially not make other plans. Librarians can promote by word of mouth as well. Take a second to

inform patrons of the programs that are upcoming when assisting or speaking with them. If a library has

a website, this is a great tool to spread the word as well. This will ensure as many patrons as possible

will see the information and be more likely to attend.

Circulation of Games

The process of circulating games may seem overwhelming to some, but it does not have to be.

Games have so many parts, and it is hard to know whether a patron will treat each piece with care, or if

the library will receive the game back destroyed. Although that seems to be a reason to not purchase

games for a library it is just the same as circulating a book, audiobook, or DVD. The patron has the

responsibility to handle each item they check out with care. If the materials they return are damaged,

they are now responsible for paying for the repairs or new purchase that is needed to restore the item.

There are several different ways that games can be circulated in libraries. Libraries can choose for

patrons to only play them in the library, check out for take home use for a certain period, or only

available during special events held in the library. The University of North Texas Media Library

conducted research on the best use of circulating tabletop games or board games. One of the main

concerns that any library has is the preservation of the pieces, boxes, and instructions of a game. The

UNT library tested different levels of preservation on several games to see what preservation tools

would work best for longevity. The library chose to spray pieces with water-resistant spray, placing book

tape cloth to box corners, sleeves over any cards, and coating certain pieces in a protective wax (Robson

2018). These measures may seem a bit too much to tackle when incorporating games in libraries, but it

can help with lessening the damage received to each part of the tabletop games. The UNT library found

that supporting the corners of boxes was the most effective in preserving the box of each game, but that

everything else seemed to receive little damage whether protected or not. Their study was only

conducted over an eight-month period, and they rated the damage "on a scale from zero to three where

zero equals no damage, one equals minor damage (still usable), two equals moderate damage (may

impede game play), and three equals significant damage (unusable). Lost pieces were tallied" (Robson,

2018, p.84). The range of which damage is received will be different for each library. This will be based

on the size of the library, and the number of patrons interested in checking out or playing board games.

The UNT library is a smaller academic library so their results may not reflect overall damage or use for a

library that is larger and sees more patrons.

The library also chose to add barcodes and call numbers to their board games for circulation

stats. The library had four different copies that they tested with various levels of labeling. The first copy

received only a label on the box, the second copy received a label on the box and the pieces bagged and labeled with the number of items, the third copy received a label on the box, board, and each bag of items along with the number of pieces in each bag, the last copy received the same as copy three and additional labeling of pieces stating it was from UNT (Robson, 2018). The library did this so they could determine how to keep the number of pieces as close to the original as possible. It is inevitable that some patrons will likely lose game pieces when taking them home, but different processing may help not only the library but the patrons to keep track of all the items within a game. Overall, UNT noticed that no matter the preservation efforts games will more than likely have only a "three-year lifetime" before needing to be replaced. They also experienced minimal loss when it came to the game pieces no matter the labeling of the game (Robson, 2018). Again, this was a project conducted for less than a year in a library that was smaller, so when considering tabletop games, a library must consider what it will do to control damage and losses to the games. UNT decided that minimal labeling and preservation would work for their library, but it is up to each library to decide. If libraries have the staff to preserve and label each game to the highest standard, that would be the way to go to ensure everything receives the least amount of loss and damage. Someone must also determine when pieces get lost how will they replace the pieces. Either by replacing the game or purchasing extra game pieces to act as replacements when the losses occur.

Games in Libraries in the Future

As a society, more and more information has gone digital. The library must remain relevant and updated to these changes, or they could become obsolete. Libraries already have evolved to house computers, wi-fi, mobile hotspots, and more for their patrons. Games are just another part of this evolution. Libraries can start by using board games but thinking ahead for the future means other platforms. Many people in the world today are using technology in some form or fashion. Many of the population play video games or are looking for careers involving video games. Providing physical

materials such as gaming books or articles simply will not satisfy or entice those patrons for long. Libraries must think about what will draw those underserved patrons to the library. This means providing newer games and platforms. Video games and online gaming are becoming increasingly popular. Video and online games provide the same number of educational tools to remain true to libraries missions in providing knowledge to the community it serves. If libraries provide these services, the underserved patrons may be more likely to explore other services in the library. Libraries can start by sharing links to gaming sites or gaming reviews and expand their resources from there. Even creating a survey for patrons to fill out can make a huge difference and not leave staff determining what is best for the library patrons, but instead knowing what they want.

Many blogs and websites set up by librarians that libraries can follow for information on the interest of games as well. For example, Game on: Games in Libraries, LibGaming, and organizations like OCLC and the American Library Association hold seminars on game relevance and provide guides for incorporating games in libraries (Kirriemuir, 2006). These are important resources libraries can follow to stay current in the field of gaming in libraries.

Conclusion

Games are important materials to add to library collections whether they be academic or public. The size of the population or patronage does not hinder a library from providing these services. One of the most important things a library must remember is to make sure to publicize their programs and new materials, so patrons know and are more likely to get involved. Games while they are fun, provide educational and social skills for those involved. This adheres to the missions of many libraries in helping the community to learn and accrue knowledge. Games have been present in libraries for longer than many realize which is why it is important that a focus should be placed on them being added to collections. Even if libraries do not have a large budget to add a huge collection, games can be donated

or used for specific events only. Then once a library is able, they can investigate expanding the service.

Games allow patrons to socialize with others, create friendships, and interact with a diverse community.

Programs can help educate patrons on uses of games in careers and how they too can pursue a career.

Overall, the library can expand its patronage and its mission of serving the community can be met by

including services that appeal to those who might be intimidated or underserved in a library, and

encourages those patrons to come back.

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