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Games in Libraries: Myths and Realities

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Over the last few years, the Library Game Lab of Syracuse has been exploring how libraries have been using games in their services. As we have worked with librarians, we have realized there are a few commonly-held misconceptions about games in a library setting. Here are some of the common myths and the realities of gaming in libraries:

Myth #1: Games are new in Libraries.

Libraries have been using games as part of their services for decades. In fact, our research traces gaming in libraries back to 1855 at the Mechanic's Institute Library in San Francisco, which had a chess room. The chess club that met there still meets today and is the oldest chess club still running in the U.S. Many libraries have had games like checkers and chess for years, and many summer reading programs are centered on some type of a reading-achievement game. The format of popular games has changed, but the concept of games in libraries is not a new one.

Myth #2: Gaming is for teens.

Just as there are books for all ages, there are games for all ages. A game collection, like a book collection, needs to be developed to represent the needs of different patron groups. Well-designed gaming programs can target families with a variety of experiences that the family can enjoy together. Board games and card games can be played by people of all ages. The Nintendo Wii has also broken down traditional boundaries of console games; many senior centers and now libraries are finding success in Wii bowling matches as a way to engage a new audience with video games. A senior, a teen, an adult, and a child who did not know each other prior to the gaming session can play Wii Tennis together. After the game, they are comfortable enough with each other to have a conversation, which aids the library in the role of community hub.

Myth #3: Recreational gaming is just for public libraries.

Recreational games have a place in other types of libraries. Gaming improves the social connections among patrons and helps them feel the library is relevant to their lives. School libraries find that after-school gaming clubs allow students to connect and build social relationships with similar students. Students who typically would sit alone on the playground can find a connection with others through a gaming program. Academic libraries find that gaming allows students to relax from studying and develop connections with each other. Savvy academic libraries combine games with information literacy activities to engage students in other library services while motivated by games.

Myth #4: Libraries are turning into arcades.

Gaming in libraries is a relevant service for many. While storytime is an important service in public libraries, having storytime programs doesn't make the library into a daycare center. Coffee is a relevant service for many, but a library with a café is not a coffee shop. Gaming services are offered alongside other library programs as another relevant service.

Myth #5: Gaming programs are expensive.

Gaming programs are about the facilitation of an experience. It is expensive to keep up with the newest electronic games, but board, card, or roleplaying games or older game consoles can offer similar social experiences at a much lower cost. Libraries will be financially challenged to keep up with all of the new games, so those planning gaming programs should focus on the gaming experience rather than the games themselves. Another model for an inexpensive gaming program is encouraging patrons to bring and teach their favorite games. Many communities have board game clubs where members can bring and teach a variety of games. Engaging patrons in the planning and leadership of gaming programs can aid considerably in the library resources and time needed to run a gaming program

Gaming programs are a way of providing a relevant service that can attract those who are not typical library users. About three-fourths of surveyed librarians report that patrons who participate in gaming services return for non-gaming activities. Once patrons are in the library and perceive the library as having relevant services for them, librarians can use this as a marketing opportunity to expose patrons to other library services. While games are a form of play, it is important for librarians developing gaming programs to treat them as seriously as any other library service.

If you would like to learn more about gaming in libraries, you can visit the Library Game Lab of Syracuse's website at <http://gamelab.syr.edu> where you will find updates to our projects and all of our publications. In addition, you can listen to the monthly Games in Libraries podcast at <http://gamesinlibraries.org>. The American Library Association has a gaming resources wiki at <http://gaming.ala.org/resources>.