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Finish Your Games so you can Start your Schoolwork: A Look at Gaming in School Media Libraries**Scott Nicholson, Associate Professor, Syracuse University School of Information Studies**

Gaming is growing into its role as a new media, sitting beside books, music, and film as a way of both recreation and education. Games have been a part of humanity going far back into history, although the hieroglyph that translates into Dance Dance Revolution has not been discovered. Libraries have also been supporters of games; many public libraries have games available in the children's section or have hosted a chess club. As the popularity of computer and video gaming has grown, some libraries have incorporated these leisure activities into their offerings.

One difficulty in making decisions about adding gaming activities to library offerings is a lack of documentation about what other libraries are doing. This makes it difficult to make evidence-based decisions and to justify choices to administration. As gaming is playing a more significant role, it is important for librarians to have access to data about how gaming is supported across many types of library settings. The purpose of this article is to discuss the results related to school media libraries from a larger-scale survey done of gaming programs in libraries.

Background

In order to better understand the intersection of gaming in libraries, I started with a survey of public libraries. Public libraries do not have the curriculum-based directive of school and academic libraries; in addition, one of the goals of most public libraries is to be a community hub. It is important to note that librarians were asked to consider all types of games, from traditional board and card games to Web-based computer games and console-based video games.

This study started with 400 U.S. public libraries chosen at random, and I worked with Syracuse University students to call them and ask a few questions about how they support gaming. All but 18 responded to the survey, and it was assumed that these non-responding libraries did not support gaming. This survey showed that 77% (+/-5%) of public libraries supported gaming of some type. Less than half, 43% (+/-5%), of libraries run formal gaming programs. Only about 20% (+/- 5%) circulated games. For both gaming programs and circulation of games, more libraries supported tabletop board and/or card games than supported electronic games. More details from this study can be found in the white paper *The Role of Gaming in Libraries: Taking the Pulse at* <http://boardgameswithscott.com/pulse2007.pdf>.

2006 Gaming Census

The next step in this research agenda, and the focus of this article, was the 2006 census of gaming in libraries. The goal of this survey was to reach out to librarians of all types and have them tell us about how their libraries are supporting gaming. This was an Internet-based survey available for a few months in the spring of 2007. We invited libraries that supported gaming of any type in 2006 to talk about how gaming was supported. The survey was advertised on prominent lists for public, academic, and school libraries; it resulted in 314 responses.

About 2/3rds of the responses were from public libraries and another 10% were from academic libraries. Most of the remaining responses (23%) were from school media libraries, and these 78 school media library responses are the focus of this article. We are not claiming that these responses are representative of any population, as this was only a convenience sample, but this is a pilot study that indicates the need for more explanation and helps us to understand how to better ask questions in the future.

As this was a general survey to all library types, specific questions that would typically be asked of school libraries were not used. Instead, more generic demographic measures were collected. Libraries were asked to categorize themselves by size – the largest third, the smallest third, or somewhere in the middle. Almost half of the libraries were in the middle, a little over a third categorized themselves as small, and the remaining 15% were large libraries.

Libraries were also asked to categorize themselves as rural, suburban, or urban. About 40% of the libraries were rural, another 40% were suburban, and the remaining libraries were either urban or didn't fit in any single category.

Results from Gaming Census

The first series of questions related to the circulation of games. About 30% of the libraries that responded circulated games of some type. Table 1 contains the different types of games and how many school media libraries circulate each. Note that libraries may circulate multiple types of works.

Types of Games Circulated	Percentage of Responding Libraries
None	69%
Board/Card Games	19%
PC Games	9%
Other	6%
Console Games (Playstation, Nintendo, Xbox)	3%
Roleplaying Games	1%

Table 1: Types of Games Circulated

The next series of questions had to do with what types of games were allowed on library computers. About half of the libraries responding allowed Web-based games of some

type on their computers, while about a third of responding libraries allowed no games on their systems. The rest of the responses can be seen in table 2.

Types of Games Allowed on Library Computers	Percentage of Responding Libraries
Web-based games	51%
None	33%
Locally-installed games that are purchased	26%
Other	14%
Locally-installed games that are free	9%

Table 2: Types of Games Allowed on Library Computers

Librarians also talked about the policies they have regarding playing games on library computers. Some reported policies at the district level, while other policies were at the school or library level. One librarian reported that their district’s policy did not allow games, but he/she was choosing to ignore that policy and allow games in their library.

Most policies that govern games in school media libraries fall into one of four categories. About half of the libraries had some type of policy that allowed games, with 32% of the libraries allowing educational games only. A smaller group (17%) had policies that allowed recreational games during free time. Some of these libraries had explicit policies based upon the other needed use for computers; if the computers were not needed for school work, then they could be used for games. About one out of five libraries had a policy preventing any gaming in the library, and 28% of libraries had no policy at all. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Policy Details	Percentage of Responding Libraries
No Policy in Place	28%
No Games Allowed	18%
Educational Games Only	32%
Recreational Games during Free Time	17%
Other	5%

Table 3: Policies Regarding Gaming in School Media Libraries

Individual Programs

After answering these general questions, libraries were given the opportunity to describe individual gaming programs run in their library. Fourteen librarians chose to talk about gaming programs, so the rest of this article will discuss these programs in-depth.

The programs were a mix of educational and recreational activities; half of the programs described involved educational games. To put this in context with the larger-scale study, about 7% of the programs described by public libraries and 9% of the programs described by academic libraries involved educational games. More than half (57%) of the programs

involved some type of competition, which was close to the result for the other types of libraries.

The libraries reported the goals and outcomes for the program. The goals were selected from a list, or libraries could add their own. For school media libraries, the goal of running the programs varied considerably; there was no popular answer. This is different than in public libraries, where the most popular goal was to attract an underserved group of users to the library. The different goals and their frequencies can be seen in Table 4.

Most Important Goal	Frequency
To attract an underserved group of users to the library	3
To allow users to improve their skills/knowledge	3
To increase the library's role as a community hub	2
To provide an additional service for a group of active library users	2
To recognize the cultural significance of the gaming medium and to participate in it	1
Keep them Busy	1
Fundraiser	1
To help develop new literacies	1

Table 4: Most Important Goal for Gaming Programs

This diverse spread of goals suggests an interesting challenge for school media librarians trying to develop gaming programs and for researchers looking to support these librarians. One of the long-term goals of this gaming research agenda is to develop gaming programs based upon these goals. Since school media gaming programs have a wider variety of goals, it is more difficult to create gaming programs that can meet all of those goals. Therefore, it is important for researchers, when developing programs to be used in school media programs, to create smaller program components that can be assembled by an individual librarian based upon their local needs.

Users were also asked about the outcomes of the gaming program. One interesting finding from this data is that, for 8 of the 14 programs, users attended the gaming program and then came back to the library another time for a non-gaming activity. For the public libraries responding, 84% said that users who came to the gaming program returned another time. This may just be representative of the fact that only 14 programs were described for school media, but is an interesting point for future exploration, as it

seems counter-intuitive as many students are required to visit the library in ways that they are not required to visit a public library.. In contrast, only one librarian reported that users came to the library for the gaming activity, but then did not return to the library; this proportion is smaller than the 16% of public libraries reporting the same outcome.

Descriptions of Individual Programs

Of the programs described, half focused on games primarily designed for education while the other half focused on games primarily designed for recreation. It is important to note that these categories are not distinct; educational games will have some recreational qualities, and recreational games can teach not only traditional lessons, but also other types of skills not addressed in traditional education, as Gee explored in his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.

One library turned to game show formats for educational content. This medium-sized, suburban school used a computer with an overhead projector to play games based off of Jeopardy, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, and Hollywood Squares as a way of engaging 50 students in an educational and fun program. This same library also employs games to encourage students to come to the library and learn about good books to read. The primary goal of these programs was to attract underserved groups of patrons to the library.

Keeping in the theme of trivia games, another library uses their school's intercom system to run school-wide trivia games. This medium-sized rural library also allows students to play Web-based educational games in the library and circulates educational PC games.

A small urban library recognized the need to provide gaming opportunities to those whose families can not afford this luxury and ran a 25-student gaming program that allowed students to play both computer and board games. The librarian reported that "many urban and immigrant students do not have opportunities to play traditional board games with peers (and perhaps not ever with families) so providing board games to use in school libraries offers them a chance to play with peers and learn the games." This library also circulates board and card games and allows patrons to play selected Web-based games on library computers.

A number of school media libraries used board games such as chess and Scrabble along with puzzles like Sudoku as part of library programs. While these games do not necessarily advance the curriculum, they do allow the development of planning, logic, and critical thinking skills. Programs focused on these activities can be very low-cost with inexpensive chess boards, or as one small rural library found, free Web-based chess games where students could play with each other. Each of the four programs focusing on these more traditional games had a different primary goal – to be a community hub, to attract an underserved group to the library, to increase the participants' skills/knowledge, and to "keep them busy."

Along with online chess, several libraries had program focused on selected online games. Many of the online word-based games such as Lingo and Twixt are appropriate educational activities that improve spelling and vocabulary skills. One library allows teachers to select appropriate online games, just as the librarian might work with teachers to develop the print collection. The students are then provided with listing of these approved games for playing on library computers.

The remaining programs focused more on the recreational nature of gaming activities. While the educational gaming programs were more likely to be regular offerings of the library, the recreational gaming activities were typically tied into special programs. One medium-sized urban library ran bingo events with books for prizes. Another library turned to the popular musical video game Guitar Hero as a library fundraiser after school hours.

Many of these recreational gaming programs involved many types of games. One military high school ran a program twice with a wide variety of game choices from dancing games and Super Mario to Uno and Risk. A large suburban library that circulates PC games and tabletop games found success with a student-planned library program featuring Super Smash Melee, Wii Sports, UNO, and other card games.

Some libraries run regular recreational gaming programs. A creative small rural librarian ran a biweekly introductory roleplaying game appropriate for children called *Faery's Tale*. A small rural library runs a monthly game program with a variety of tabletop games, such as the collectable card game Yu-Gi-Oh, party games like Scattergories and Taboo, and board games like Monopoly, Battleship, and Mars 2020. One library runs a weekly game night that draws 70 students every week, where students play. In this library there is no gaming allowed during school days, but once a week students can play Halo, Dance Dance Revolution and Wii games along with tabletop board and roleplaying games. The advantage of these types of multi-activity programs is that many different types of students can participate, thus allowing students from different social groups to mingle.

One librarian stated a concern with using the library space for gaming: "The shared space concept only works if gaming students can respect the rights of others to be able to use the library for more traditional services. This did not always happen as the noise level often reached outside recess levels." This is a significant concern for the typically small facilities that school media libraries occupy, as many gaming activities do create noise. One librarian provided a solution, saying that "if students get too rowdy, or if we're full with research projects or classes, we send sets of the games (Scrabble boards and pieces, chess sets) to the study halls so that students can still play."

Another problem came with providing appropriate supervision. One middle school had a successful chess club for three years, but had to discontinue the program as they did not have enough adult volunteers to supervise, stating that "Many students saw the library as a welcoming spot to congregate after school. However, the lack of additional adults to supervise was a factor in my having to end the program." One librarian had a program

with age limits, in that students wanted to join the gaming activities so badly that they (and sometimes their parents) would lie about the ages of the students. Two librarians found that involving students in the organization of the event led to successful programs and more student involvement in the library.

Conclusions

Due to the size and method of the sample taken for this study, there are no conclusions that can be drawn about the larger population of all school media libraries. This study does provide some basic concepts about different ways teacher librarians are using games in their libraries, and will be useful in helping us develop measures that will provide data about the larger population.

What this study does highlight is the variety of ways that games can be incorporated into a school media library. Games do not always have to be of the “educational” variety; most games have some mix of educational and recreational components. Gaming sessions can not only be used to support the curriculum and teach students different types of skills, but also can bring in non-library users and provide additional services for existing users.

There is a wide variety of gaming experiences available, and all sizes of libraries in all types of settings can find appropriate gaming activities for their space, time, and budget. It is important to consider the desired goals for the integration of gaming into other library services, as this is useful in making decisions about what types of games to use. Much of today’s discussion of gaming in libraries focuses on the console-based music games, and these games may not be the best gaming activity for many school media applications.

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