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Creating a Gaming Experience in Libraries

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Traditionally, libraries have provided access to board games like Chess and Backgammon, but most have had these games stacked in the corner in the Children's section with other books and toys. Some libraries take the same approach to a gaming program; they stack the games up in a room, turn on the video games, and wait. Some libraries keep the gaming out of sight by putting the players and games in a back room and closing the door, leaving the gaming event to run on its own.

There are many potential problems with this approach. Players who don't know how to play a video game may not feel welcome in trying the game, especially if there are experienced players around who are more interested in showing off their skill than actually helping others learn the game. If nobody knows the rules to a board game, it will most likely sit there unplayed. Negative experiences can be a deterrent to an attendee coming again to the library for games or even coming again at all.

A better concept is to provide a gaming experience. Just like storytime is about creating a larger experience around a specific tale, a gaming program is about creating a larger experience around a game. One question about games in libraries is – "Why come to the library to play the game when you can just play the game at home?" One answer is that the library can provide a gaming experience that goes beyond the game itself.

One element of a gaming experience is presentation. Something as simple as projecting a video game up on a screen takes the same game that someone plays at home on a small screen and turns it into an experience. Players who walk into a board game event and see games all laid out and ready to play will be more excited about engaging with the games than players who see a stack of boxes. Games should be made as welcoming as possible for people to engage with them.

A second element to a gaming experience is facilitation. Along with having the games readily accessible, the library should have staff and volunteers ready to welcome players and to teach them the games. Those working in a gaming session need to be aware that it is not their job to play the games; they should teach the games and only play if another player is needed for a good gaming experience. Library staff should help attendees find the games that best meet each player's interests and capabilities.

The third element in the experience is interaction. Not only should the staff match players to games, they should match players to each other. A tournament structure will allow a different type of interaction than an open play structure. Staff should also interact with attendees, especially those who are shy or not involved with games. Staff may also need to intercede to ensure that the interactions between players are positive, suggesting good sportsmanship behaviors when tempers flare over a game.

These three elements – presentation, facilitation, and interaction – are tools that the library can employ to take the same game someone has at home and turn it into a part of a larger library gaming experience. This experience can be something that players can't get elsewhere, and thus, attendees will continue to visit the library for these gaming experiences. The library can then apply and market that they have other sorts of experiences – reading, music, computer, and social experiences, to encourage those coming for games to discover more of the library.