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The Role of Gaming in Libraries: Taking the Pulse

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Introduction

Over the last few years, some libraries have been turning to gaming activities like *Dance Dance Revolution* as a way of bringing in new demographic groups and exposing them to library services. Recently, Jenny Levine, a.k.a. The Shifted Librarian, wrote an American Library Association publication highlighting different types of video gaming activities in libraries (Levine, 2006,) and other librarians have written about their experiences in print and online (Neiburger, 2007; Schmidt, 2006; Gallaway, Schwarzwald, Czarnecki, 2007). Gaming is rapidly growing into the next new media as sales of games have outpaced box office sales and are predicted to grow beyond music sales in the near future (Alpert, 2007; Cheng, 2007). Just as libraries have caused controversy in the past by adding fiction to their offerings and circulating recreational videos, libraries are creating controversy today by supporting gaming through in-house gaming activities and circulation of gaming materials.

At this point, there is little data about the penetration of gaming in library services. There is anecdotal data and guides to best practice, but there is little data about how many libraries are supporting gaming and in what ways. Therefore, the goal of this initial pilot study is to take the pulse of public libraries in the U.S. and understand the role gaming is playing in library services.

Method and Assumptions

In order to take the pulse of the role of gaming in libraries, I worked with Syracuse University LIS students Valerie Sallis, Charles Bush, and Kathryn Mary Buturla to develop and carry out a phone survey of U.S. public libraries. Four hundred libraries were selected at random from over 9200 public libraries listed through the Library Statistics Program, part of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007). The research team called the selected libraries in April and May of 2007 and asked a series of questions about how they support gaming. We asked libraries to consider gaming broadly, including games of all types from board and card to Web-based and video games.

After multiple tries, we were able to contact all but 18 of the libraries, giving us a response rate of 95.5%. In order to maintain the integrity of the sampling method, we kept these 18 libraries in the data analysis and assumed that they did not support gaming activities in any way. After examining the available data on these libraries, we determined that most were small libraries with very limited staff and hours, so this

assumption is most likely an accurate assumption. One library refused to participate, so it was also placed in this non-responder category. The results presented below may be conservative because of this assumption.

The margin of error for these results is +/- 5%, with a p-value of .05. While this is a fairly large window, it will still allow us to understand more about the population based upon this sample. This first study should be viewed as a pilot study upon which future explorations will build.

Description of Sample

The sample of 400 libraries was a purely random sample, and therefore it represents the makeup of the population. There are many more small libraries, as determined by population served, than there are large libraries, so our sample contains many more small libraries than other types. Table 1 contains a breakdown of the sampled libraries by size, based upon the population served. Seventeen of the non-respondents were small (1-3000) and the last was large (50000+).

Table 1: Size of Libraries in Sample

Population served by Library	Number
a. 1 - 3000	112
b. 3001 - 10000	121
c. 10001 - 50000	106
d. 50000 +	43
Non-Respondents	18
Grand Total	400

Results

The most important question in this survey was the first one – does the library support gaming? We asked the library to consider gaming in a broad sense, including anything from hosting the local chess club to allowing patrons to play Web-based games to circulating tabletop or digital games to providing resources for patrons to create their own games. The result is that most U.S. public libraries support gaming. In fact, 77% of the public libraries surveyed supported gaming in some way. Even taking the margin of error into account, we are comfortable saying that at least 7 out of 10 public libraries support gaming.

At least 7 out of 10 public libraries support gaming.

This is a higher portion than many might expect. There are two types of common gaming that came out in discussion with libraries. For decades, public libraries have supported gaming by providing chess sets and other games in the children's area. A more recent type of game enjoyed by patrons in libraries are Web-based games; in fact, women over the age of 40

are more likely to play these online games than other demographic groups (CNN, 2004). The contrast between these gaming types suggests the importance of taking a holistic view of gaming, including both traditional and digital forms of games.

The size of the library does make a difference; as Table 2 demonstrates, larger libraries are more likely to support gaming than smaller libraries. Due to the +/-5% margin of error, we can not say that it is a significant difference, but it certainly merits further study with a larger sample.

Table 2: Libraries that Support Gaming by Size

Library Size	Supports Gaming
a. 1 - 3000	76%
b. 3001 - 10000	77%
c. 10001 - 50000	87%
d. 50000 +	88%

Gaming Programs

We then moved on to ask about formal programs where the library facilitated gaming activities. We found that 43% of our sample hosted formal gaming programs where patrons played games in the library. Again, there appears to be a difference based upon the size of the library, as seen in Table 3.

About 4 out of 10 public libraries run gaming programs.

Table 3: Libraries that run Gaming Programs by Size

Library Size	Runs Gaming Programs
a. 1 - 3000	38%
b. 3001 - 10000	39%
c. 10001 - 50000	50%
d. 50000 +	67%

We then followed up to learn what activities were done during these formal programs. The data from this question is in Figure 1; libraries were allowed to provide more than one answer to this question. Out of 172 libraries that run formal programs, about half of them said they use “board games” in those programs; 45 libraries named a specific traditional game such as Chess, Bridge, or Go. Only about 13% of libraries use console games (like Nintendo or Xbox) for their gaming programs.

Figure 1: Types of Games used in Formal Programs



This finding provides evidence for the need for those looking at gaming in libraries to consider more than just console games for gaming programs. While the popular console games have their role as a gaming offering, they need to be placed in context with other forms of games that the libraries have traditionally offered. In addition, communities resistant to the introduction of video games in libraries may find it easier to accept if these activities are placed in context with other activities already supported in the library.

Circulation of Games

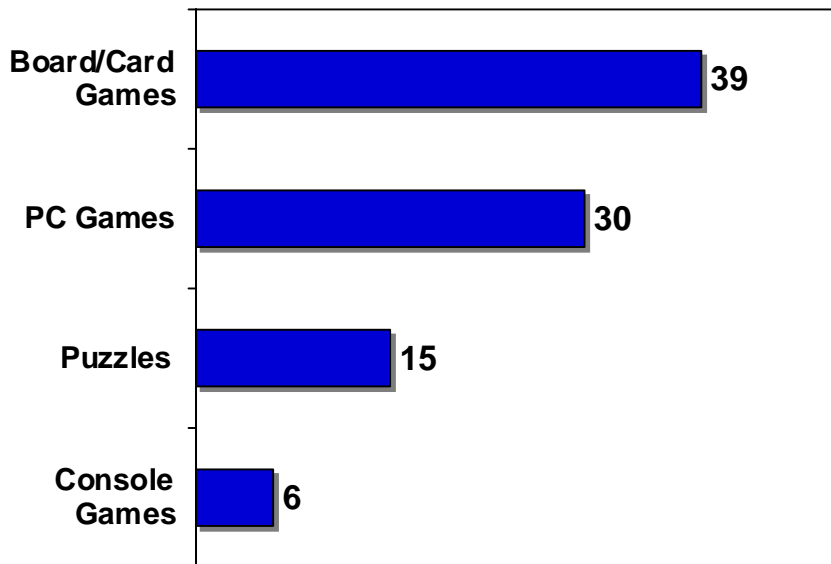
Our next area of inquiry focused on whether the library circulated games, and if so, what type of games were circulated. We found that a small portion, only 20%, of surveyed libraries circulated games. The size of the library played a smaller role this time, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Libraries that Circulate Games by Library size

Library Size	Circulate Games
a. 1 - 3000	17%
b. 3001 - 10000	17%
c. 10001 - 50000	27%
d. 50000 +	23%

Traditional games were also the most common type of game circulated, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of Games Circulated



In-House PC Gaming

We then asked libraries if patrons were allowed to play games on the computers in the libraries. An astounding 82% of libraries did allow patrons to play games on the computers in the libraries. When contrasted with the first question, at least 5% of the libraries surveyed allowed patrons to play games on computers in the library, but did not see that as supporting gaming in the library. This points to a need for advocacy to help libraries consider gaming as a significant service they can offer patrons.

Again, the size of the library does make a difference, as can be see in Table 5.

Table 5: Libraries allowing Patrons to Play Games on Computers by Size

Library Size	Allow Patrons to play PC/Web games
a. 1-3000	80%
b. 3001 - 10000	82%
c. 10001-50000	92%
d. 50000 +	98%

Summary

This pilot survey turned up several findings of note. At least 70% of libraries support gaming, and about 80% allow patrons to play games on library computers. Only about 20% of libraries circulate games, but about 40% of libraries run in-house gaming programs. These data point to the need for more funding and research to explore this phenomenon of gaming in libraries. Since most public libraries do support gaming in libraries, the research community should support these librarians trying to make decisions

about gaming activities. Just as there are guides to collecting books and running summer reading programs, there needs to be guidance as to what gaming activities are best for different types of patrons. Focusing too heavily on one type of gaming activities, such as the popular *Dance Dance Revolution*, will leave certain demographic groups of patrons out of the gaming picture.

This study also highlights an important strategy for libraries bringing gaming into their community. There is a wide spectrum of game types from board games and card games to Web-based games and console games, and electronic games are just an extension of gaming activities already supported in libraries. Libraries that support the recreational needs of patrons through fiction or movies are simply extending these services to the popular entertainment media for a growing sector of the population. The concept of supporting gaming is one that most libraries have supported for some time.

Future Research

I am currently seeking funding to start the Library Game Lab of Syracuse, to be housed at the Information Institute of Syracuse, in the Syracuse University School of Information Studies. This survey was done as the first small step to demonstrate the need for more funding and research on the phenomenon of gaming in libraries. Some of the initial explorations we would like to do with the Library Game Lab include:

- Larger surveys of different library types to have a better baseline of the current support of gaming in libraries
- An annual Census of gaming programs done in libraries
- An exploration of the economics of gaming in libraries, working with economist Ian MacInnes, also from the Syracuse University School of Information Studies, to understand the public good of recreational gaming and how libraries could support that
- The development of a gaming thesaurus, headed up by David Dubin, from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana Graduate School of Library and Information Science

Our long-term goal of the project is to systematically explore different types of gaming activities for different demographic groups. A key part of having a successful gaming experience is a good match between the games and the players, and we would like to explore this intersection. Our Gaming Census will tell us the goals libraries have in running gaming programs, and we can develop ways of measuring those goals, have subjects play different types of games, and use that evidence to create guides for libraries running gaming activities. We will also serve as a hub between game companies and libraries, providing reviews, training, and a traveling lab where we can visit libraries to test our programs in the field and provide librarians with different gaming experiences.

This project currently needs financial support to grow. More information about the Library Game Lab plans can be found at <http://gamelab.syr.edu>. Questions can be directed to the Library Game Lab Director, Scott Nicholson, at srnichol@syr.edu.

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