

Preprint of Nicholson, S. (2009). Why gaming? *Digitale Bibliothek* 1(1), 17.

Why Gaming? Goals for Gaming Programs in Libraries

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A rapidly growing number of libraries offer formal gaming programs where users can come together and engage in gaming experiences. These games include video games, tabletop games, or other activities like treasure hunts and murder mysteries. As many perceive games as a new service for libraries, one response in the press is the questioning of these services. Because of this, it is important for libraries planning gaming services to ensure that the goals of the gaming programs align with the goals and policies of the library. Over the last two years, I have done an annual survey of libraries doing gaming programs collecting data on what the goals are of library gaming programs.

In the first goal-related question, libraries indicate all of the goals that they are meeting with gaming programs by selecting them from a list, and the most frequently selected goal for gaming programs in libraries is providing a source for entertainment. Libraries recognize that part of their purpose is to provide for the recreational information needs of their patrons and have done so in the past through recreational reading, music, and, in more recent years, movies. There has been a growing body of evidence pointing to the role that gaming plays in our patrons' lives. Recent studies from the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that gaming is a regular pastime for not only young adults, but also for a growing number of adults and senior citizens. Therefore, libraries are adapting to support these changing recreational needs.

In comparison, libraries were asked to select the single most important goal of the gaming program. The entertainment goal was selected much less frequently as the primary goal; the most common single goal is to provide a service for underserved library users. The use of console-based video games typically targets teens in order to bring them into the library. Savvy librarians use this opportunity to market other library services, and anecdotal evidence supports that circulation of teen-related material goes up after a teen-focused gaming program.

Another common primary goal is to provide a new service for current library users. Gaming during a summer reading program is one example of this type of program. As librarians become aware of more types of games, connections between games and existing popular library services will be more readily made. In addition, working with a group of patrons to develop library game programs can engage a core group of attendees to be engaged and even assist with the gaming programs. Libraries may start with the first goal of drawing in the underserved and then move into the second goal of serving their new group of regular patrons.

One additional common goal for gaming programs is to allow the library to become a community hub. There are few community spaces today that are non-commercial, non-religious, and safe spaces for people of all ages to come together and meet. Libraries interested in pursuing this goal should select games that enable more social interactions and create gaming programs that draw in players of all ages.

When planning gaming activities, aligning the overall goal to the library's goals can help those who plan programs make justifiable decisions. In addition, having goals makes it easier to make decisions about what games to use, what patron groups to target, and how the program should be structured. Finally, knowing the goals allows the library to assess how well the program is meeting those goals, which is key in ensuring the continued support of these programs.

Originally published as Nicholson, S. (2009). *Digitale Bibliotheek 1(1)*, 17.