Gaming, Comics and Graphic Novels in Public Libraries

Assignment 4

Team 4
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Abstract

This study explores the issue of gaming and whether or not public libraries are justified in providing space for teen gaming and access to teen comic books and graphic novels. In response to a city councilman’s concerns about gaming, this study explores the value of introducing gaming in public libraries. In addition, acceptable forms of gaming in libraries as well as the impact of such services are evaluated. The paper relies on both the qualitative and quantitative research methods previously utilized by library scholars in assessing this issue. Lastly, the study clarifies the current misunderstandings related to the value of gaming in libraries and highly recommends implementing gaming in forms that promote development of information literacy skills and positive recreational experiences among library users.
Introduction

Libraries have provided gaming services to patrons for decades. Over the past several years, the practice of providing gaming space and access to teen comic books and graphic novels in public libraries has visibly expanded, and justifiably so. Both the Internet and television have increasingly influenced the rearing of the millennial generation. Additionally, the various forms of information technology and gadgets regularly consumed by the population in the current global economy have impacted the learning styles and social interaction preferences of young adults today. As a result, public libraries are recognizing that former approaches to engaging individuals in study and creative recreation (i.e., having them silently read print sources) are being replaced by new mediums. In response, public libraries are working to update their programs to reflect teenagers’ learning and entertainment needs by introducing interactive digital resources and gaming into young adult services.

Gaming in public libraries still, in some instances, lacks the support of government entities that fund libraries, and not everyone agrees that gaming is a legitimate form of a public library service that deserves public funding and acceptance. When introduced to library services many years ago, board games, such as chess, were stigmatized the same way that video games are today (Library Technology Reports, 2008). Games have certainly “evolved to include even greater degrees of literacy and engaging play, making many of them appropriate for use in libraries” (Library Technology Reports, 2008, p. 11). Thus, awareness needs to be raised regarding the positive impact that access to gaming services in libraries can have in the lives of young adults. Library-funding bodies must recognize the importance of promoting rather than discouraging such evolutionary approaches to serving the ever-changing needs of the public.
To thoroughly analyze the value and impact of gaming as a public library service, it is important to understand what gaming entails. For that reason, this study explores not only the types of gaming activities that libraries might choose to implement for best results but also the significance of such service offerings. In addition, this study seeks to dispel the prevailing concerns regarding the negative effects of gaming. This assessment demonstrates the indispensable role that gaming currently plays in attracting young adults to public libraries and reveals the overall contributions such gaming activities can make to enhancing information literacy levels and its ability to elicit digitally-based social interactions that today’s society demands.

**Literature Review**

Young adults are undeniably a growing segment of the population that public libraries must acknowledge in their services, programs, and collections. In the past, libraries viewed young adults as part of the children’s department, but today, young adults are generally considered to be those between the ages of 13-17 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Hence, libraries and librarians now recognize this group as a unique entity with their own set of information-seeking behaviors and needs.

According to a 1993 National Center for Education Statistics study, only 23% of young adults used public libraries, while 37% of children used public libraries. This study revealed lack of interest as one of the main reasons young people chose not to frequent public libraries. Although in 1993 these young adults were not interested in using public libraries, statistics indicated that they were interested in playing video games and reading graphic novels.
More recently, in 2007, the American Library Association surveyed 1,262 youths between the ages of 8 to 18 and found that 31% of respondents visited the public library more than ten times a year (ALA, 2007). The same survey indicated that these respondents would use public libraries more if: 1) there were more interesting materials to borrow (32%); 2) more activities and events were offered (32%); the libraries were open longer hours (31%); and the libraries created a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere (22%) (ALA, 2007).

Perhaps because of their visual appeal and interactive nature, the demand for video games and graphic novels has increased explosively over the past few years. Video games and graphic novels have, thus, become “mainstream” and part of popular culture. In fact, playing video games has become a popular pastime with at least 42 million American players (Delneo, 2005). In 2006, sales of computer and video game software in the United States reached 7.4 billion dollars (Scordato, 2008). Moreover, graphic novels are one of the fastest growing literary genres, and the sales of such novels increased from $75 million in 2001 to approximately $100 million in 2002 (Wolk & Reid, 2003). These statistics, coupled with the fact that public libraries need cutting-edge methods of attracting young adults to the library, indicate that public libraries should include gaming as part of their programming and graphic novels as part of their young adult collection.

Libraries certainly benefit from offering gaming as a service. Improved library image and an increase in the number of teen users shows that gaming can serve as a bridge between library staff and young adults. By fostering these relationships, library staff can develop social connections that ultimately lead to teens returning to the library and possibly participating in other library programs, such as the teen advisory board. In addition, a study by Nicholson (2009) shows that data describing 218 program offerings in 2007 of 404 public, academic, school, and
special libraries indicated the following library benefits: improved reputation with participants (65%), participants returning to the library later for non-gaming services (64%), gamers using other library services while at the library (61%), improved social connections between users and friends also visiting the library (60%), improved social relations with previously unknown individuals (52%), and overall publicity (47%). Thus, gaming, in general, improves the role of the library as a community hub.

Besides benefiting libraries, gaming allows participants to develop new strategies for learning that are absolutely necessary in the 21st century. “Games require players to learn and follow complex sets of rules, make strategic and tactical decisions and, increasingly, collaborate with others…all things they will have to do in college and in the workforce” (Rettig, 2009, p. 10a). In fact, librarians who have implemented gaming at their libraries note that playing games promotes literacy, problem-solving skills, strategic thinking, multitasking, play, simulation, and risk taking (Waelchil, 2008). Furthermore, “on the most basic level, all video games require the development of cognitive skills that are useful in the always “on” modern world, such as pattern recognition, spatial reasoning, and information processing (Neiburger & Gullett, 2007, p. 36).

Gaming has the ability to bring together a diverse group of individuals. Teen gamers, in particular, come from different schools, cliques, races, ages, and cultures, which “give[s] them a relatively level playing field that they can't find anywhere else” (Neiburger & Gullett, 2007, p. 35). Graphic novels, like games, can be equalizers for those who are underserved by the library. Containing a combination of both images and print, graphic novels typically address social, political, and cultural issues. By combining print and pictures together, these novels allow readers to make their own content interpretations and individual connections, which are a form of visual and information literacy (Schwarz, 2007). In addition, graphic novels promote media
literacy by challenging readers to explore emotions as portrayed by character expressions, angles affecting perception, and the realism of the work (Bucher & Manning, 2004).

Because graphic novels often cover socio-political issues, they enable the reader to use rhetorical analysis. Graphic novels promote critical thinking among young adults by allowing them to question the validity of information in society, detect prejudice and inequality, seek diverse points of view, and connect with difficult social issues (Schwarz, 2007). Furthermore, research shows that graphic novels are linguistically equal to other works of literature (Sheppard, 2007).

Captivating reluctant readers is a difficult task. Graphic novels, however, have successfully attracted these readers because they “are often based on the author's own experiences, telling stories and conveying information in ways that can, in particular, engage students who are not well served by the usual text materials literacy” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 2). This is especially applicable to boys. In fact, a 2002 study conducted in 24 schools in New South Wales and Tasmania found that boys prefer electronic and graphic forms of literature and are more likely to engage in real-life literacy contexts, such as debating, drama, and public speaking (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002).

For librarians to be considered “next generation,” new technologies and media formats must be adopted. Games and graphic novels have to be seen as educational tools rather than incentives. And, for many readers growing up in a media-rich world, games and graphic novels can be valid forms of education. Moreover, “growing up with television and video games, contemporary young adults look for print media that contain the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contribute to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy”
Gaming and Comics in Public Libraries 8

(Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 67). Thus, graphic novels, containing a combination of images, art, and text, appeal to many young adults who have come to enjoy visual stimulation.

Methodology

To explore the elements of gaming and assess the impact of providing gaming services in libraries, this study draws on research conducted in the last five years by library scholars. To analyze the value of gaming services in libraries, research, relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods, has been consulted. These relevant qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluating the impacts of gaming are:

- Determining the degree to which the availability of gaming opportunities at a library serves as an incentive for teenagers to visit the library;
- Understanding what types of gaming services users find attractive and why;
- Whether gaming influences any increases in the library’s circulation figures; and
- The degree to which gaming contributes to advancing teenagers’ academic performance and their adaptation to technology-based forms of social interaction.

(Neiburger & Gullett, 2007; Nicholson, 2009; and Lipschultz, 2009)

Surveys, questionnaires, interviewing, and focus groups may be used to acquire qualitative measurements. Gathering circulation statistics and referring to school statistics regarding changes in academic performance and the factors that may be contributing to those changes are among quantitative measurements that can be employed to assess the value of providing gaming services in libraries.

The value of gaming cannot be determined without first identifying the appropriate standards that libraries, schools, and parents need in educating the next generation of global
citizens. The American Association of School Libraries’ (AASL) *Standards for the 21st-century learner* (2009) may be consulted to determine the range of services that libraries and schools are expected to provide to young adults who are developing the literacy skills currently in demand in contemporary society. Consider AASL’s (2009) prescriptions on this issue:

- Today’s students need to develop information skills that will enable them to use technology as an important tool for learning, both now and in the future.
- All children deserve equitable access to books and reading, to information, and to information technology in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning.
- Information literacy has progressed from the simple definition of using reference resources to finding information. Multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological, have now joined information literacy as crucial skills for this century.

(PP. 2-3)

Accordingly, the value of implementing gaming services in public libraries should be partially assessed based on the ability of a given game to assist teenagers in developing the skills that organizations, such as AASL, ALA (American Library Association), and YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association), define as important for young adults to attain to become full-fledged literate members of society.

In addition, social science research findings regarding the popular appeal of games may also be used to assess the value of introducing gaming into public library services. For instance, the Entertainment Software Association’s research results indicate that over sixty percent of heads of households play games (Scordato, 2008). “Ninety-three percent of parents who play computer and video games have children who also play, and 80 percent of gaming parents say they play games with their children” (Scordato, 2008, p. 68). Relying on such findings about
characteristics of popular American past-times can help determine successful approaches to disseminating information literacy skills, among them introducing certain types of gaming opportunities. Undoubtedly, if given the choice between picking up a book in print and reading material that is delivered in a digitally-based interactive format resembling the experience of game playing, the majority of contemporary young adults are likely to become intrigued by the latter option more so than the former.

Furthermore, the utility of introducing various games in the library collection may be assessed based on the role those games play in developing young adults’ critical thinking skills. For instance, Gee’s (2007) book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, as cited in *5 Things You Should Read About Gaming and Learning*, claims, “good video games incorporate good learning principles” (ACRL & ALA, 2008-2009, p. 2). Gee has identified “36 such principles, discovered through analyses of actual video games and their relation to real world learning experiences, some coming directly from the classroom” (ACRL & ALA, 2008-2009, p. 2). According to Lipshultz (2009), Christopher Harris and Brian Mayer used the *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*, published by ALA’s American Association of School Librarians, to appropriately choose “games that taught students about inquiry, use of information resources, participation in knowledge-based collaborations, and other critical-thinking skills. (p. 41).

**Analysis**

When advocating the implementation of gaming (e.g., video games, computer games, board games, etc.), comics and graphic novels into a library’s program or collection, data supporting the positive benefits related to these additions should be analyzed. Gathering both qualitative and quantitative data supporting the idea that both games and graphic novels help
young adults to achieve visual and media literacy is imperative. There are many variables that may influence both qualitative and quantitative data. These variables include the size of the library, the library’s budget, how gaming is implemented, and the graphic novels in the collection. However, patterns and correlations have emerged so that the impacts of gaming and reading graphic novels can be studied.

Examining public library case studies regarding the implementation of gaming and/or use of graphic novels can provide a number of insights. See Tables 1 and 2 for outcomes identified through the use of qualitative assessment methods.

**Table 1: Positive Outcomes Derived From Implementing Gaming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Perspective</th>
<th>Customer Perspective</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library improves its reputation with gamers</td>
<td>Improvement of problem solving, critical thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants return to the library for non-gaming services</td>
<td>Improvement of visual literacy and media literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamers use other library services while there</td>
<td>Opportunity to socialize with diverse peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved relationship between staff and participants</td>
<td>Improved relationships with friends who also play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library gets to promote other programs and services</td>
<td>Library is considered a “cool” place to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library increases its role as a community hub</td>
<td>Discovery of other library programs and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New programming ideas for librarians</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Source: Nicholson, 2009*  
*Source: Waelchil, 2008*

**Table 2: Positive Outcomes Derived From Offering Graphic Novels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Perspective</th>
<th>Customer Perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting YA collection demands</td>
<td>Library collection is relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased circulation of YA materials</td>
<td>Library collection is useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get reluctant readers into the library</td>
<td>Library collection is desirable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Schwarz, 2007*  
*Source: Schwarz, 2007*
Data, such as field notes and behavior, suggests that reading graphic novels may also help to:

- Develop an increased interest in reading.
- Increase literacy.
- Develop language skills and a rich and varied vocabulary.
- Foster interest in a variety of literary genres.
- Foster interest in a broad range of topics.
- Stimulate a creative imagination.
- Develop an appreciation of art.
- Develop the ability to discuss and critique art and writing.
- Increase understanding of how meaning is found in visual phenomena.
- Enhance understanding of pop culture and other media.

(Hill, 2004, p. 6)

Between 2007 and 2008, the Pew Internet and American Life Project surveyed 1,102 young adults between the ages of 12 and 17. The study found that 97% of teens play computer, web, portable, or console games. The most popular games played were racing games, such as NASCAR and Mario Kart (74%); puzzle games, such as Bejeweled and Solitaire (72%); sports games, such as Madden and FIFA (68%); action games, such as Ratchet and Clank (67%); and rhythm games, such as Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution (61%) (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008). The same study reinforced what other studies have shown: gaming is a social experience for teens. In fact, 65% percent of teens play with the other individuals in the room and 27% play games with people via the Internet (Lenhart et al., 2008). These findings indicate that gaming teens exhibit pro-social behaviors, such as positive social interaction skills, self-regulation, achievement behaviors and creative play (Lenhart et al., 2008).
The Pew Internet and American Life Project study attempted to measure “civic gaming experiences,” which were defined “as experiences young people have while gaming that are similar to offline experiences in classrooms and schools that research has found promote civic and political engagement in young people” (Lenhart et al., 2008). See Table 3.

**Table 3: The Prevalence of Civic Gaming Experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>% teens having the experience “at least sometimes”</th>
<th>% teens “often” having the experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help or guide other players</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about moral or ethical issues.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about a problem in society.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about social issues.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help make decisions about how a community, city, or nation should be run.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize or manage game groups or guilds.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Lenhart, et al., 2008*

The findings in Table 3 indicate that a possible positive correlation exists between game playing and the development of fundamental competencies for life – or lessons applicable to real-world situations. Table 4 provides sample competencies acquired through gaming.

**Table 4: Games and Corresponding Competencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pokemon</td>
<td>Card</td>
<td>Determining if/then clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungeons and Dragons</td>
<td>Role Playing</td>
<td>Interpreting manuals, story telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlers of Catan</td>
<td>Board</td>
<td>Resource sharing, problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guitar Hero</td>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Reacting to visual/auditory cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fataasy Football</td>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>Research, critical thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: ALA, 2009*
According to the American Library Association (2009), “awareness of what it takes to be an active and engaged participant in society has changed; so libraries have changed the way they understand, promote and support literacy.” See Table 5 for the different literacies that gaming and reading graphic novels may help participants gain.

**Table 5: Games and Graphic Novel Literacies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21st Century</td>
<td>Print, visual, audio</td>
<td>Ability to use technological, interpersonal, communication tools and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Photos, charts, video</td>
<td>Ability to interpret, assess, process, and make meaning from visual images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Blogs, TV, movies</td>
<td>Ability to critically assess messages presented by media outlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT (Information, communication, technology)</td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Ability to use software and hardware to communicate knowledge and ideas, ability to assess digital information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALA, 2009

The above chart shows that literacy today encompasses more than the print world, delivered through different mediums. Being proficient in a literacy means being competent in skills that are useful in today’s society.

**Recommendations**

If librarians wish to implement gaming in libraries, they must first recognize that certain stereotypes related to gaming exist. According to the ALA (2009), only 15% of games sold in the United States were rated *M for Mature* or for those over 17. This directly contradicts the idea that all games are violent. In addition, most games are in fact interactive and have various social elements. This certainly challenges the view that games are anti-social.

To ensure best practices for gaming and graphic novel implementation, libraries and librarians should establish a clear set of objectives and then determine appropriate selections.
The ALA’s web page entitled, “The Librarian’s Guide to Gaming: An Online Toolkit for Building Gaming at Your Library,” is an excellent place to begin. In addition, YALSA can be consulted for a list of recommended titles for building graphic novel collections. And, peer libraries that have successfully implemented gaming and offered comics and graphic novels can serve as models for such services. In some libraries, for example, “teens [actually] run the gaming programs, decide what games to have, compete in library teams, or post their comments about games in general or library tournaments on their library’s blog” (Makens, 2007, p. 27).

Certainly, the cost-benefit ratio will have to be taken into consideration. Although video games are most popular, librarians can start with less expensive games like board games or other interactive games that are educational in nature. And, because most libraries have conference rooms or meeting rooms, these spaces can be used for a variety of gaming events. Thus, space will not have to be created just for gaming.

**Conclusion**

Today, libraries are no longer places where patrons can just borrow materials. They are transitioning into community hubs where people go for events, services, and programs. The role of a librarian is also changing from inactive to proactive. Advocating for the needs of young adults is an essential part of this change. Because libraries already function as community gathering places that encourage education, socialization, play, and cultural enrichment, they can also serve to fulfill the needs of younger generations.

Gaming and other visual media, such as graphic novels, are permeating the lives of American teens—younger teens and older teens, girls and boys, and teens from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Gaming and graphic novels have impacted young adults, and libraries can no longer ignore this. Libraries must acknowledge recent trends and stay abreast of new tools
and technologies that benefit both libraries and their young adult patrons. This includes exploring ways in which both gaming and graphic novels are used as educational tools for teaching reading, information, and media literacies.

Libraries must continually evolve to meet the needs of the growing population of young adults as well as the other groups they serve. To be truly relevant to society, libraries must offer innovative programs and services that will both educate and entertain. Implementing gaming and introducing more comics and graphic novels to a collection are examples of how libraries can continue to evolve in an effort to meet the needs of their communities and users in the 21st century.
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