

Got Game? Greater Victoria Public Library's Video Game Pilot Project
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Abstract:

This session describes the planning, implementation and outcomes of a recent pilot project introducing video games to the Greater Victoria Public Library in Victoria, Canada. The importance of video games is briefly outlined, followed by how public libraries can incorporate this new technology into their services, collections and programs to engage teen patrons and support their development. Victoria's collections and in-library gaming stations are overviewed, along with information about staff training, patron reactions and future considerations.

Introduction

First of all I would like to thank the organizers for putting together this amazing satellite conference! It is a privilege to be here and I'd like to also thank the three sections of IFLA (Public Libraries, Children and Young Adult Libraries, and Management and Marketing) and the Association Les Bibliothèques publiques du Québec for all their work.

Today I am going to tell you about a recent video game pilot project in my home library in Victoria, Canada. The Greater Victoria Public Library has nine branches and serves about 300,000 residents in the ten municipalities that make up the capital region of the province of British Columbia.

I will start by outlining some background about gaming and libraries, and then tell how gaming fits in with the Greater Victoria Public Library's mandate. I will outline how we built our initial collections and set up our in-house gaming stations. Then I will report on the performance of the pilot project and our future plans and considerations.

Gaming and Libraries

Gaming and libraries has been a hot topic in some countries for several years and many public and academic libraries now offer game collections, programs and resources. In Canada, video games are a format that libraries cannot afford to ignore. Video game rental and sales statistics indicate that video games are top choices for entertainment and leisure. In the year 2000, Canadians spent one billion dollars on gaming software and hardware, while they spent only slightly more, \$1.2 billion, on recorded music (Overview of Industry). In 2001, consumers in the United States spent \$1.4 billion renting DVDs and \$633.6 million renting video games (Video Industry Experienced), a considerable investment in this format. Video games sales in the United States surpassed box

office revenues in 1999 (Gentile 6), and it is reasonable to expect the situation is similar in Canada.

Video games are extremely prevalent and libraries must include this popular format in order to continue to serve the needs of our communities. Researcher and writer Marc Prensky notes that “a tremendous amount of learning takes place when kids play these games” (10), noting that problem solving, cooperative skills, and strategic abilities are developed through game play. According to Kurt Squire & Constance Steinkuehler,

“Game Cultures promote various types of information literacy, develop information seeking habits and production practices (like writing), and require good, old-fashioned research skills, albeit using a wide spectrum of content. In short, librarians can’t afford to ignore gamers.”

Today’s children and youth have always had video games as a choice for their entertainment and educational needs. The integration of these new technologies in public library practices is critical in reflecting the realities of our young users and equalizing opportunities to grow up digitally literate. The digital divide persists; if public libraries do not offer video games in our communities, some children will not enter the labour force with the same marketable skills as others.

Gaming at the Victoria Library

At the Greater Victoria Public Library, it was recognized that games have been central to leisure and learning for all time, and video games are no different. Libraries support leisure and life-long learning in all formats. The inclusion of video games in our library’s circulating collections is an important part of carrying out our vision of inspiring literacy, lifelong learning and community enrichment for all. It is also crucial to our younger library patrons who move fluidly between adapted formats: books, movies, games, websites, magazines and manga. Libraries reflect their worlds when they include all popular formats.

The introduction of games to our library supports strategic objectives set out by the library’s Strategic Plan. Specifically, games will “provide resources, programs and services designed to meet informational, educational and recreational needs of various age groups, as well as the information needs of businesses and organizations”, “use technology to deliver library resources, programs and services, and expand access to other learning opportunities” and “create customer-focused culture by responding to and anticipating customers’ needs” (Strategic Plan 7).

In the fall of 2007, a pilot project was introduced at the Victoria Library. The pilot began with the addition of in-house gaming stations and circulating collections. Gaming computers were included in the start-up costs of a new branch being

built and library's Friends of the Library group contributed \$5,000 for the initial collection. Another \$1000 was secured from the new branch's opening supply budget to purchase console equipment for future gaming programs and events in the library.

Collections

Providing circulating collections is the unique role the public library plays in the community. In Victoria, most of our community and recreation centres have youth drop-in spaces, and several are equipped with gaming equipment. In addition to providing gaming stations and programs, libraries have the infrastructure and knowledge to make games available to be shared by all our patrons.

The first consideration for the collections was where to buy the games. Traditional library vendors in Canada are now beginning to offer video games, but at this time we are still buying them through a retail source in order to get the most current titles and take advantage of the staff's deep knowledge of the gaming industry.

Secondly, much thought went into what kinds of games to offer. We decided not to offer PC games because of possible copyright issues when people download game software to their home computers. Instead, we started by offering console games that people play on their home equipment, and that are commonly rented out by major entertainment chains such as Rogers and Blockbuster.

There are several different consoles available. Consoles are machines that people have at home that enable them to play video games. Similar to loaning DVDs or cassettes, the library does not provide the equipment to patrons, but supports the equipment they already have. GVPL's initial pilot includes games for PlayStation, Playstation 2 and 3; Xbox and Xbox 360 and Wii. Games for handheld consoles such as Nintendo DS and Sony PSP were not included in the initial collection because they tend to be marketed to a younger audience and we wanted to engage teenagers.

Of the many types of games, we wanted to include some variety between simulation, strategy, puzzles, role-playing, and action. We decided not to include any first-person shooters in our pilot because we wanted to see how the community would react to the format. However, many public libraries do include first-person shooter games, and sales figures would suggest that many families buy and rent these games regularly. Despite potential public concerns about violence in video games, the library has a duty to reflect what its community actually wants. It is worth also noting that many extremely popular video games are not violent.

All video games are rated by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), a “non-profit, self-regulatory body that independently assigns ratings, enforces advertising guidelines, and helps ensure responsible online privacy practices for the interactive entertainment software industry.”

Game ratings include Early Childhood, Everyone, Everyone 10+, Teen, Mature, Adult Only, and Rating Pending. In Canada, the ESRB has partnered with the Retail Council of Canada and the Entertainment Software Association of Canada to launch a program called the Commitment to Parents. In this program, retailers and rental businesses agree not to sell or rent games rated Mature or Adults Only to anyone under that age of 17 or 18. While this is a voluntary program, a quick survey of local game rental outlets indicated that it is followed. Issues of intellectual freedom emerged for the library as we considered whether we should allow anyone to borrow any rating of game and know that parents have responsibility for their children’s choices, or whether we should enforce the game ratings set by the ESRB. At this time, the highest rated games we offer are Teen rated games, but we may want to offer games with higher ratings in the future. We decided to align our game loan policy with our DVD policy, wherein children cannot borrow movies rated 14A or higher, or games rated Teen or higher.

Cataloguing the games proved to be relatively straightforward, as bibliographic records are readily available from OCLC. We wanted to be sure they were easy to find in our catalogue and it was clear which console they are for. We also wanted to make it possible to search by just one console type, as people with a PlayStation at home do not want to search our Xbox games and so on. As well, we tried to foresee the potential for growth and movement of this collection and wanted to create bibliographic record standards that would be long lasting for our uses.

We decided to call the format “game” instead of “electronic resources” and to include the console type in the call number so that the items would be easy to browse by console. We also created some “canned searches” on our website, so that patrons can click on one link that enacts a search query that automatically sorts by console type and rating.

Processing was handled in the same way we process DVDs. We added a sticker to each box to make sure they appear distinctive from DVD cases, mostly to aid staff in quick sorting and reshelving.

The loan periods and overdue fines are also aligned with our DVD policies to keep things straightforward for patrons and to keep this high-demand collection on the move. A lower overdue fine rate was briefly considered. Management had legitimate concerns that teens would amass large fines from overdue games and lose borrowing privileges, thus alienating the very population we are attempting to serve. Ultimately it was decided that teens can have the same

respect and responsibilities as other patrons, and that the value of the games is too great to reduce the overdue fines.

Gaming Stations

Greater Victoria Public Library offers free Internet and computer services to the public. There are also computers designated for children in each library branch's children's area. However, no computer resources were designated for teen users. Teens often used the Internet stations in the general computer areas to play games and to engage in collaborative, social computer use. This means they cluster together and make noise. Youth tend to be more social in their computer use than their adult counterparts, particularly when playing online games.

To accommodate the different kinds of computer use, it made sense to create a designated area, away from the larger computer labs, where teens could play online games and be social while accessing library computer resources.

Three teen gaming stations were installed in a new library branch that opened last fall. These computer stations have Internet access and preloaded PC game software. Offering console games such as Xbox or PlayStation is not practical for an unsupervised library environment, but many games popular with youth are available as PC games, or are played online.

The stations are located between the staff desk and the Teen Zone. Headphones are provided, and there are several games to choose from. An age limit is not enforced, but signage clearly states that the games are rated Teen and are best for ages thirteen and older. Children may be redirected to the computers in the children's area. There is an automatically enforced daily time limit of one hour per person and library cards are required for log in.

Promotion

We marked the official launch of the video game collections with a small event. The head of the sponsoring Friends of the Library group game and unveiled the collection to a group of local teens. We had door prizes and the teens got to be the first to sign out the games. Several teens signed up for library cards that day so that they could borrow games.

The library issued a press release before the launch of the games. This attracted the attention of the media as well as the public. The Canadian Broadcast Corporation, our national public radio, interviewed me about games in libraries and a local college radio station did a feature as well. We promoted within the library with displays, posters, handbills and our website. We also created a pamphlet of information for families all about video games and the library's collections.

As patrons learned that video games are now available at their library, purchase suggestions for specific games started to come in. People began reserving them through the library's online catalogue. A very high number of searches conducted on the library's website are for games. Between January 22 and February 1, 2008, 89 keyword searches were for "Wii" and 79 were for "PS2" (PlayStation 2). These two searches ranked #9 and #10 of top ten searches conducted by library patrons overall.

Perhaps the most important part of marketing to youth is having what they want. While some patrons expressed happy surprise that the library offers video games, many took it in stride as something we should obviously offer. Conditioned to the retail environments of video rental chains, some patrons naturally expect the library to offer video games too.

Outcomes of the Pilot Project

The initial collection was launched on November 15, 2007. 102 items circulated 585 times in the last six weeks of 2007. Therefore, the average circulation per item was about once a week, meaning that every item was in constant circulation. During this period, all items in this new library branch were protected from holds. Patrons could come into the library and borrow them, but they could not request them online or from another branch. In January 2008, holds were enabled, following the six-week start up period for the new branch. Immediately a very high number of holds were placed on the games, some games having thirty or more people waiting for them. As a result, the circulation per item dropped, since now the games spend time in transit between branches and waiting to be picked up by the next patron in line.

The gaming stations have been quite successful, engaging new library users. They are in constant use and have promoted interaction between the library staff at the desk and the teens on the computers. Anecdotally, most of the users are teenaged boys, preteen boys, and sometimes men. It is great to see the library serving boys who tend to be a group underserved in public libraries catering to women's and girls' recreational and information reading. When asked what they think of the library's gaming stations, here is what some teens said:

"There should be more!" Jarret, age 14

"They're great!" – Levon, age 14

"I think there should be another computer so there can be more people playing." – Logan, age 14

When asked whether they were library users before, the boys responded, "No" and "No, not really."

We believe that offering video games both to play at the library and to borrow helps meet the developmental needs of our teen patrons. By providing a separate teen gaming space in the library, teens are no longer admonished for

their social behaviours and for interacting with their friends around the computers. Relationship building and peer relationships are extremely important in adolescent development. The game stations attract teens to spend their leisure time in a safe space dedicated to developing positive assets in youth.

We know that we are providing gaming opportunities to kids whose families may not afford them. For a generation of avid gamers, it is important that no child is left out of this phenomenon that will surely shape future workplaces and social interactions.

Staff Training

Both the gaming stations and the new collection format were introduced to staff before being implemented. While currently not all branches have gaming stations or collections, expansion is projected, and staff is often called upon to field questions about anything in our system.

I attended branch staff meetings throughout the system to introduce myself as the new Teen Services Librarian and also to outline the gaming pilot project. This approach demystified the new format for staff members, many of whom simply wanted to know how soon they could borrow them! As well, I developed a Frequently Asked Questions document for our staff intranet for people to refer to while getting used to the new format and the stations.

A staff in-service is planned that will combine theory and research with hands on experience with games. A professor in the Faculty of Education at our local university specializes in literacy and researches youth and video games. She will present some recent findings about video games and literacies emerging with new technologies. Following that, staff will be invited to try the Wii and PlayStation 2 that the library purchased for programs.

Challenges

To date, we have had one written request for consideration regarding video games. It came from a sixteen-year-old boy who described himself as a library user and a gamer. He wrote that he does not think the library should be offering games, only books and perhaps DVDs. This patron concern was handled the same way as all other patron concerns, with a written explanation of the library's mandate and collection policies, and a note that all patrons may choose for themselves what they would like to borrow or not.

Additional Considerations

Theft and loss of the games has been about the same as DVDs, or probably any new format as it was added. However, we did not foresee the greater wear and tear there would be on games. When a DVD is borrowed, it is usually handled

once by the patron during the loan period, in order to view the DVD. On the other hand, patrons put games in and out of their players several times as they may play several different games during the week. The games are deteriorating faster than DVDs.

Console game disks can be cleaned and resurfaced just as DVDs can, and this maintenance should have been factored into the original proposal. As well, we cannot test all the games when patrons report they are not working, as it can take as much as fifty hours to play through one game. Another reason staff cannot test thoroughly is because we do not have all six consoles for the different kinds of games we offer. Providing games is certainly worth doing, but it is worth noting that it is slightly more expensive than providing DVDs.

Future Plans

The success of our gaming pilot has encouraged us to plan expansion to additional branches. A significant collection budget for games will need to be secured, both for the start up collections and annual additions, replacements and so on. Gaming stations will now be installed in any new branch that opens, including one scheduled for fall 2008. Offering gaming stations in existing branches may involve considerable renovation and rewiring, and may take longer to achieve.

Originally, youth involvement was expected for the development of the gaming collection. Due to a highly unusual labour disruption for many months at GVPL between 2007 and 2008, youth were not involved with the initial set up of collections or the first gaming stations. However, a Gaming Advisory Group of game-savvy teens will be created to ensure meaningful youth involvement with future developments. These young people will advise the library about what games to offer, how to market to their peers and what equipment to invest in.

Currently, almost all the video games we offer have long waitlists, and as a result, almost nothing appears on the shelf. We plan to improve the visibility of the collection through a parallel collection of games that will not be available to be put on hold. This will improve service to our walk-in patrons, and increase the likelihood of new people signing up for library accounts in order to borrow a game. This set of video games will also enjoy brisk circulation as time will not be lost on the Holds shelf or in transit. While many of our regular patrons are adept in placing holds online, the "Fast Plays" collection will also ensure that there are items in the branch at any given time, giving the sense that the library "has good stuff", "has what I want", and "has what I want when I go there".

Gaming events are planned using the PlayStation 2 and Wii consoles that were purchased for the library. Gaming events will include teen tournament and some all-ages family fun events.

Conclusion

The public library has a responsibility to offer relevant collections and services for our communities and video games play such an important role in the culture, education and recreation of young people that they must be included. Libraries are uniquely positioned to lend out games and can offer gaming in the library through stations and special events, and we will no doubt see a growth in video game services offered in public libraries in the coming years.

As gaming guru Eli Neiburger says, “if you don’t offer them something that has value to them now, you’re going to be irrelevant to them for the rest of their lives. It’s not a risk we can afford to take” (Blyberg).

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