Circulating Video Game Collections in the Academic Library

Research & Innovative Services Report
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Executive Summary

Research Question

Should OSU Libraries (OSUL) have a circulating video game collection?

Rationale for a video game collection

A circulating video game collection could support learning, bring new users to the library, and help students make connections with their peers. Good video games are designed in ways that encourage learning, critical thinking and problem-solving. Video games are also a new field of study within computer science, new media communications, and other fields such as sociology or women studies.

Arguments against collecting video games

Shrinking collections budgets are inadequate to fund the core academic mission of the library. Video games are peripheral to that mission and there is a large collection of circulating video games at the public library.

SWOT Analysis	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- OSUL has experience with circulating media collections - OSUL is responsive to students' needs - OSUL is viewed as a forward-thinking library by our users	- Funding - Policies and procedures not in place - OSUL librarians have limited knowledge and/or experience with video games
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Drive new traffic to library - Raise circulation statistics - PR and partnership opportunities - Tap new donors who don't ordinarily give to the library - On the forefront of a new trend in academic libraries	- Negative reactions from faculty and /or donors - Rapidly changing game market - OSUL future budget uncertainties - Opposition from OSUL librarians and staff

Full Report

Background

A review of the scholarly literature about video games and gaming reveals little research has been conducted on gaming and academic libraries. This is not surprising since only a handful of academic libraries have gaming collections and these collections are relatively new. Academic libraries with game collections include Art Institute of Washington, Franklin Pierce University, Indiana State University, Indiana University, Savannah College of Art & Design (SCAD), Simon Fraser University, Stanford University, UC Santa Cruz , University of Illinois , University of Michigan, University of Oregon (UO) and University of Wisconsin,.

Even so, a closer examination of the available literature does reveal many interesting statistics and positive outcomes associated with gaming. According to Branston (2006) "The power of video games to teach cannot be denied. Scholars in the field of game studies are well aware of the peripheral and accidental learning that goes on behind the scenes as a child, teenager, or adult engages in an interactive video game." In a 2005 study 81% of online teen internet users (17 million teens) played online video games (Gibbons, 2007, p. 23). However, the stereotype of the gamer as an anti-social teen male has proven to be untrue in extensive studies conducted by Nick Yee, a doctoral student at Stanford. Yee found the average age of MMORPG (**m**assively **m**ulti-**p**layer **o**nline **r**ole-**p**laying **g**ame) players is 31.7 years for women and 25.7 years for men and only about 25% of players of MMORPGs are teens (Gibbons, 2007, p. 25).

> **"The power of video games to teach cannot be denied."**

In her book *The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student* Gibbons (2007) suggests academic libraries collect gaming software that would fit into "leisure" collections; and goes on to suggest a list of games compiled by Squire and Steinkuehler (2005): *Civilization III, Sim City, Age of Empires, Rome: Total Ware, Age of Mythology, The Sims, Roller Coaster Tycoon, Pikmin, Animal Crossing, Sid Meier's Pirates!, Rise of Nations, Ico, and Deus Ex.* (p. 37). Gibbons concludes her chapter on gaming by saying, "Academic libraries cannot afford to ignore the growing interest in online gaming" (p. 42). As her chapter suggests, "playing computer games is not merely a diversionary activity. Inside well-designed games rests great learning potential. As more educational games are developed and the acceptance of computers games as a teaching tool increases, academic libraries will feel increased pressure to find ways to support the medium. Why not get a head start now?" (p. 42).

> **"Academic libraries cannot afford to ignore the growing interest in online gaming."**

Oakley (2008), a librarian at Guilderland Public Library in New York, states that adding video games to a collection positions the library as a "total media and information destination" that fulfills user needs. At his library, circulation of teen fiction and nonfiction generally increased by about 4% annually, but the year video games were added circulation for teen literature increased 20%.

An article by Neiburger (2007) insists that video games teach information literacy as gamers must continually read text, interpret it, decode information, etc. Neiburger (2007) also believes that video games help develop spatial reasoning, something that is necessary in today's jobs. A study cited in his article found that surgeons who played video games for at least 3 hours a week performed 27% faster and made 37% fewer mistakes than surgeons who didn't play video games. In addition, Neiburger's research (2007) points out that simulation games are particularly useful education tools as they offer models of the real world that are far more "complex and of a grander scale" than can be offered in a lab or classroom setting.

In June of 2008, ALA received a $1 million grant from Verizon to study how gaming may improve problem solving and literacy skills. Out of the twelve libraries partnering with ALA to formulate best-practices, only one is an academic library, the University of Illinois (ALA, 2008).

Models for Circulation

Circulation models for video games range widely from institution to institution. Of the ten academic institutions responding to the research team's queries thus far (Art Institute of Washington, Franklin Pierce University, Indiana University, Indiana State University, Savannah College of Art & Design, Simon Frasier University, Stanford University, University of Illinois, University of Michigan, and University of Oregon), seven provide browsing access to their game collections. Security measures are always taken including providing the empty case for browsing but keeping the actual disks secured until checkout or keeping the browsable media in Kwik Cases which need to be electronically unlocked at checkout. These same institutions allow their games to circulate from 7-21 days.

Three institutions do not provide browsing access to their game collections. Two institutions allow only in-house use of their game collections; in both cases (U of Mich, SCAD), these collections are associated with faculty gaming research and game archives.

While eight institutions circulate games, only six institutions circulate controllers/consoles or other specialized equipment which some games require (e.g. Guitar Hero). One institution, while circulating hand-held controllers or consoles, will not circulate vintage controllers. Comments in response to this query include "too difficult" as the reason for not providing access to peripheral equipment.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that game collections are regularly (if not heavily) used. Only four institutions allow renewal of video games with three institutions imposing a one to three-game limit on the number of games checked out simultaneously. One institution also imposes a one-unit limit on circulating consoles. Along with two public libraries responding that games were rarely on the shelf (always checked out) and also imposing item limits, these measures suggest that circulating games are quite popular and control measures needed to be imposed to keep games circulating equitably.

> . . . game collections are regularly used.

Limited circulation statistics support the anecdotal evidence of regular and heavy game use. One public library reported that their 400-game collection has circulated a total of 3,696 times since the beginning of 2008 which is nearly half of the lifetime circulation (8,033) of this same collection. The University of Oregon (UO) reports that over an approximately nine-month period, games and consoles together accounted for 9.3% (2216) of the circulation activity in the department in which the collection resides. The games themselves (not including controllers) each averaged 18.5 uses during the same period. While this particular collection is small at eighty-eight games (it is new and growing), fully 100% of the collection has circulated. The Art Institute of Washington holds a similarly small collection (82 games) and has circulated their games 316 times in the five months since establishing the collection. When noting that average use per game (3.9) is much lower than at UO Libraries, it is worth mentioning that UO is ten times bigger than the Art Institute of Washington, no doubt a contributing factor to lower circulation.

With the popularity of video games comes the issue of late returns and lost media. While it is most common that late fines run in the range of $1-2/day, they may run as high as $3/day. Public libraries typically reported much lower fines of $0.05-0.15/day. Fees assessed for lost or damaged items range from a $30 flat fee to replacement cost or $50 plus processing fees. One library that is circulating consoles charges $500 to replace a Wii.

Rationale for building a gaming collection

Video games are ubiquitous in society and in students' lives. Games represent new ways of thinking, learning and interacting. If libraries are to remain relevant to students of the near and longer term future, libraries need to provide media that will engage them.

Academic Success

Despite the perception that videogames keep students from reading, some researchers such as James Paul Gee, note that video-gamers do a lot of reading while playing games. Gee writes that "when people learn to play video games, they are learning a *new* literacy, as well" (Gee, 2003, p. 13). He posits that the kinds of visual literacies that people who play games develop are useful in decoding and making sense of the

modern world. Also, some games seem to be driving students to seek out books that give them an edge in advancing in the game. In an article entitled *Games for Education: 2008*, Bryan Alexander (2008) notes a number of ways that gaming can be used to teach subjects and skills and to reinforce learning.

According to Alexander (2008), the subject matter of some games is clearly educational (e.g. *Civilizations*, *Rise of Nations*) (p.64). Some games can be used to teach skills that transfer to academic, work or lifelong learning. Games can be used to build teamwork, information seeking, communication skills, numeracy, and spatial learning, for example. At the University of Oregon, faculty are using a game with a medical focus to help students understand concepts in epidemiology. Closer to home, the OSU program in New Media Communications (NMC) markets its Game Lab as "a great place to learn about storytelling, marketing and the use of color, light, sound and animation." Students can also reflect on the learning they do when playing games by writing about their experiences on blogs, wikis, and by making podcasts. Students can build their own games to learn computer programming, computer visualization and graphics, and software and usability engineering. As noted in the background section, gaming is evolving as a field of academic inquiry where students and faculty analyze the industry trends, the social implications, and the gender and identity issues inherent in this new medium. Games also represent a new way of learning that is worthy of study. Teachers and librarians can study how games teach and incorporate those ideas and strategies into course design (Alexander, 2008, p. 64-65).

Student Success and Retention

Students report gaming as "a way to spend more time with friends." (Jones, 2003) A quarter of the students questioned said games helped them "make new friends as well as improve existing friendships." Research on student retention shows that making strong connections on campus positively correlates to students staying in school. The community and social aspect of college life is important for student success and retention. Video games are inherently social and could provide students with an additional way to connect with one another. For example, if the game *Rock Band* was available for check-out to student groups and University Resident Assistants (as is the case at UO), students will gather together to play the game and the process of coming to the library and checking out the game would further familiarize and educate student campus leaders about the library and our offerings and facilities.

> **Students "make new friends as well as improve existing friendships."**

Library outreach

University of Oregon librarians have used the video game collection to connect with student groups, academic success, student services, and others on campus who are concerned with campus life and campus climate. In conjunction with the student union, the library was able to get some good press on campus, including being mentioned in marketing materials put out by the student union such as posters and flyers. Since the video game collection became available in November 2007, marketing and word of

mouth have driven traffic to the under-used science library, and given the library a cutting edge, responsive vibe.

While video games may at first seem outside the scope of collections at OSUL, they are a fit with the leisure reading, videos, DVDs and music that OSUL offers to the OSU community. Also, there is not another place on campus for students to "rent" video games, so the libraries could gain a great deal of student goodwill by providing them.

Potential Partnerships

A collection of video games, especially those that are easily played with groups have the potential to provide an entrée to a closer partnership the Resident Assistants and University Housing and Dining Services. There are several student organizations with which the libraries could partner: OSU Gaming Club and ASOSU are two that readily come to mind. There are also opportunities to partner with faculty to choose games that would support curriculum. This might be an area for subject librarians to collaborate with faculty to build a corpus of game exemplars for students to study and critique. Todd Kesterson, an OSU instructor in NMC, oversees the Gaming Lab which will be moving in the near future to a completely renovated room in STAG Hall. The Gaming Lab is fully equipped with gaming consoles and is open to all students for course-related study as well as play. When informed of the OSU Libraries investigation into the circulation of video games, Kesterson stated, "I'm glad to hear you're heading in this direction. Very progressive!" Kesterson indicated the demand for video games would certainly grow as demand for the lab increases. The NMC Gaming Lab will not check out its video games; students will use them in the lab. If the library should decide to build a video game collection, subject librarians should coordinate selection with the Gaming Lab.

In addition to university partnerships, OSUL could also partner with the Corvallis Public Library to develop complementary collections. Andrew Cherbas, Extension Librarian at CBCPL has offered to work with OSUL to put on a tournament for OSU students, something he does weekly at the public library. *Note: We plan to look at the option of gaming tournaments in the library in a separate report. Andrew suggested a tournament as one way to "test the waters" to see what kind of interest OSU students have in the Libraries investing in gaming and games. Anne-Marie Deitering is proposing a gaming event in the Library for Connect week, and perhaps for future study breaks, so there may be some upcoming opportunities to gauge student interest.*

Potential Funding Sources

- Take a portion of the Computer Science firm funds to start the collection.
- Tap a gift fund to start the collection, as this would be a new initiative.
- Identify and seek grant funding.
  - For example, Microsoft Research External Research and Programming (MSR ER&P) has funded game building curricula.
- Ask students and/or alumni to donate new or used games. Alumni who are working in the gaming or computer industry may not have given to the libraries before, and this would be an easy way for them to start.
- Approach undergraduate and graduate student organizations to determine if they would be willing to contribute funds to support a game collection in the library.

Arguments against building a videogame collection

It is important to analyze new services and collections in light of the primary mission and vision of the Libraries. Collecting and circulating video games can be seen as an extension of our multimedia collections, but we would need to decide exactly how video games fit into the mix of our other materials. The costs of starting and maintaining this collection are not insignificant. The workload associated with a videogame collection would be distributed across several departments - Collection Development, Instruction and User Services (Circulation and Collection Maintenance), and Technical Services and cataloging. Public services staff, subject librarians and instruction librarians would be involved in selecting and explaining the scope and purpose of the video game collection.

Outside collecting scope

This is a new area of collecting, and it is our opinion that we are not fully funding our traditional collections. In other words, there are many other collection needs (books, videos, DVDs, databases, online collections, e-journals, e-books) that are not being fulfilled at this time. Starting a new collection in a fiscal year in which the library faces deep budget cuts may cause concern among faculty, librarians and donors. If there are faculty who need video games to augment their curriculum, perhaps those funds should come from individual department's curriculum funds, rather than using limited library funding. However, as the NMC program grows, pressure will increase to collect in support of course offerings and faculty research.

Collection costs

Many games cost $50 each and may not have a long shelf life. UO Libraries took $5,000.00 to get their initial set of games and consoles. They had a dedicated pot of money that was not earmarked for any other kind of collection, and they also had to purchase cases for the videos and special metal cases for the consoles. They have not tracked some of the peripheral funding needs, such as cases. They also had existing storage space in the science library where they lock up the games and consoles, whereas OSU Libraries would have to invest in cabinets and installation to accommodate a video game collection, should one be approved. Games that are

returned damaged may need to be run through a disk cleaner (the most effective machines cost at least $500 and UO and the Corvallis Benton County Public Library indicated their cleaners cost upwards of $2,000 - inexpensive disk cleaners are not worth using). In addition, UO Libraries is collecting three versions of each game, one for the Xbox, one for PlayStation 2, and one for Wii, as well as some games for the Nintendo DS.

Staff time and effort

If there is cataloging copy available in OCLC - as there was for some of the games at UO - then Richard Sapon-White wouldn't expect cataloging to take any longer than the videos we currently collect. As more libraries add video games to their collections, there will be more OCLC records to choose from, but at first, some of the games would require original cataloging. While Michael Book and Richard Sapon-White are not against the possibility of a video game collection, they both note that getting set up for cataloging and processing would take some time. Richard points out that catalogers would need training, and that they might also need access to game consoles where they could load the games to look at them, as they do with DVDs and videos. It is possible that catalogers could use consoles at the NMC Game Lab to do this, but it would be more convenient to have the consoles in-house. Updating games and consoles would also be an additional expense.

Selecting, processing, checking out and maintaining a video game collection incurs costs in employee time and attention as well as the original cost of the games. At UO Libraries, game consoles (Nintendo DS, Wii, PlayStation 3, and Xbox) are checked out as well as the games. The consoles and games required entirely new procedures for circulation, and it made sense for UO Libraries to take on the games and consoles at a quiet branch, rather than at the main library. It may be that circulation staff at the Valley Library are already busy enough with the items OSUL currently checks out. Video games might then be considered an additional and unwanted burden on their time and energy. Fines for late games and consoles are steep at UO and students have had a lot of questions about them, which also takes staff time.

Space and storage issues

As noted above, the UO science library had existing cabinets and available display and storage space for the new video game collection and consoles. Most of the other institutions we contacted who are collecting videogames had existing display and storage spaces. At OSUL, space is much more of an issue – where would the collection be housed and how would it be displayed? According to Cheryl Middleton, Head of Instruction and User Services, these questions are part of a larger issue about how to deal with the rest of the multimedia collection in the future. At UO, the media department has decided to display DVDs in the same sleeves that the Science Library is using to display video games in order to make that collection more readily browsed.

Video games at the public library

The Corvallis Benton County Public Library (CBCPL) owns over 400 video game titles. Most of these are for game consoles such as PlayStation 2, Wii and Xbox. None have a

mature theme. OSU students and faculty who have a current public library card are eligible to check out the games. CBCPL's current budget for video games is $5 - $7,000 per year. It might be seen as a duplication of effort for OSUL to begin to collecting games when people can go less than 6 blocks to check them out. On the other hand, CBCPL's video games are heavily circulated and there are never more than a few on the shelf at one time.

Summary

Developing an OSUL gaming collection puts the Libraries at the forefront of a new trend in academic libraries. It is expected that such a collection would be viewed by our users as forward-thinking and responsive to students needs. However, significant issues exist that could delay the start of such a collection including current and future library budget uncertainties along with negative reactions from faculty and donors. Implementation of a game collection could also face opposition from library faculty and staff who have limited experience with video games. While current OSUL policies and procedures do not cover a collection of this nature, a gaming collection is not dissimilar to other circulating media with which the library does have experience.

If OSUL were to invest in a game collection, librarians would be advised to consult with the public library and the Gaming Lab in selecting the games. UO's collection could also be a model for how many titles should be purchase initially, and for what game platforms (PlayStation, Wii, Xbox, PCs, etc) It is possible that a video game collection would attract new traffic to the library and potentially lead to increased circulation of existing library collections. The hypothetical game collection also presents nascent opportunities to form campus partnerships with relatively new and growing academic departments to develop and strengthen a unique part of the collection which in turn may lead to new public relations opportunities for OSUL. New and/or younger donors may also be attracted to contribute to such a novel collection.

Oregon State University Libraries will need to carefully weigh real and significant short-term costs against equally significant opportunities to attract new library users and donors as well as the opening to take a leading role in collection development trends in academic libraries across the country.

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