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Play Time: Why Video Games are Essential to Urban Academic Libraries

Christina Boyle

Abstract

Although there is still some hesitance to accept video games as valuable materials for academic library collections, there is a growing body of research that proves that they are highly beneficial to these institutions. The current conversation indicates that video games are useful to academic libraries, but there are no discussions of their essential role within urban library collections. In this paper, it is my contention that video games are not only advantageous to urban academic libraries, but are indisputably necessary as well. Video games are both effective community builders and catalysts for increased awareness and usage of library sources and services. I underscore the clear reasons why urban academic libraries need to embrace video games as essential materials that are uniquely positioned to aid them in serving their users.

Keywords: Video Games, Academic Libraries, Urban Libraries, Gaming, Community, Sources and Services, Gamification, Outreach, Marketing

Bio: Christina Boyle is currently the Reference & Instruction Librarian at LIM College in New York City. She earned her MLIS and MA in English from St. John's University, and holds a BA in English from CUNY College of Staten Island, where she recently taught introductory composition courses for two years. Christina focuses on reference services, instruction, outreach, and information literacy within academic libraries. Her research interests include gaming, anime, comics, cosplay, and other forms of popular culture as community builders and forms of curriculum support in academic libraries. With a background in pre-1900 British literature, she also continues to engage in the scholarly conversation within this field. Christina seeks to continue advocating for video games in academic libraries, particularly in urban academic libraries, and to further explore the roles of various forms of popular culture in libraries.

Introduction

There still exists a wide assumption that all video gamers are adolescent males who only play games to pursue escapism rather than to engage in stimulating mental activity. These assumptions are unravelling as gamers diversify and video games increasingly appear in academic settings. Contrary to the traditional belief that

video gamers are all young boys, statistics prove that the average age of video game players is 35 (Entertainment Software Association, 2016). Additionally, the percentages of male gamers and female gamers are much closer to each other than one might imagine. 59% of video game players are male, while 41% are female (Entertainment Software Association, 2016). This clearly refutes the stereotype that all or even most gamers are male. Almost two-thirds of American households have at least one member who plays 3 or more hours of video games per week (Entertainment Software Association, 2016), and of those homes with gamers (Although the term “gamer” is a label that not every video game player might use to describe themselves, I will employ use of the term “gamer” in this paper to refer to anyone who plays video games), the average number of game players is 1.7 (Entertainment Software Association, 2016). Overall, almost half of the adult population in the U.S. consists of video game players (Duggan, 2015).

These surprising metrics prove that video games are relevant to a very large portion of the population, including those who are college-aged. As the popularity of video games continues to rise among a wider range of users, various libraries have begun to incorporate video games into their collections and programs. Although it may be apparent why public libraries include video games in their collections, it is perhaps not as immediately clear why urban academic libraries might do so. According to the Association of College & Research Libraries, academic libraries should adhere to these principles (among others): “Space: Libraries are the intellectual commons where users interact with ideas in both physical and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge” and “Discovery: Libraries enable users to discover information in all formats through effective use of technology and organization of knowledge” (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011, p. 9). The Association of College & Research Libraries (2011) highlights the importance of academic libraries’ commitment to community, to promoting relationships among the campus community, and to maintaining a space in which this community is motivated to explore various platforms of knowledge and information. The popularity of video games and the expansion of their use in academic settings require library and information professionals to explore their significance to academic library collections. Video games have the potential to aid academic libraries in both strengthening a sense of community among urban campuses and in drawing users into the library space where collaborative learning can occur. Using video games as a tool for library outreach and connection is especially important for urban academic libraries, which frequently serve a large portion of commuter students and which may require extensive efforts to encourage foot traffic and involvement with the library space, sources, and services (Brown-Sica, 2012).

Although there is a surprisingly robust amount of published research which focuses on video games in academic libraries (Lakowski & Ward, 2009; Thomas & Clyde, 2013; Kim, 2015; Nicholson, 2009; Margino, 2013; & Cross, Mould, & Smith, 2015;

among others), there is a lack of definitive argument on whether or not video games are essential to these library collections, and no discussion of the issue in relation to urban academic libraries that I have been able to find. Although there are an abundance of reasons why academic libraries require video game collections, I will focus on two of these reasons which are the most significant to urban campuses. In this paper, I will argue the necessity of video games to urban academic libraries by illustrating their role as community builders and as catalysts for increased awareness and use of library sources and services.

Brief Review of Relevant Literature

Scholars have noted that video games are becoming increasingly relevant to the field of Library and Information Science, and have formed a conversation regarding the impact of games in libraries. Nicholson (2009) underscores how many academic libraries tend to build video game collections in order to promote recreational engagement on campus, therefore promoting social activity. Ron T. Brown and Tamara Kasper (2013) discuss the positive social connections that arose when video game clubs were established in certain observed libraries. The collection of video games as well as the community space in which to play them both lured patrons to the library and helped to encourage social bonds. Although the focus in his study is public libraries, Adams (2009a) stresses that video games and video game tournaments foster social connections and promote a strengthened sense of community among patrons, an applicable finding for academic libraries as well. This idea of community is also explored in relation to video games and academic libraries by Cross, Mould, and Smith (2015). These authors found that the university library community became more engaged once a video game collection was established.

Adams (2009a) also contends that by having video game collections, gaming labs, and video game programs, libraries can attract a wide range of users to the library which promotes the library collection as a whole, leading to a heightened interest in general information seeking. Librarians can take advantage of video games as an outreach tool in order to help introduce patrons to other materials that they might find relevant or interesting (Buchanan & Elzen, 2012). Even without library staff intervention, Adams (2009a) maintains that gamers who use their library video game resources also frequently check out materials related to the subject matter of the games they play, a point which will be explored in more detail below. This is a trend that scholars have noted (Nicholson, 2009; Buchanan & Elzen, 2012; Adams, 2009a; & Adams, 2009b), and which continues to highlight the relevance of video games in libraries.

Video Games as Community Builders

As stated above, there are many LIS professionals who recognize the benefits of video games in academic libraries (as well as in public libraries). Assertions that video games are indispensable to academic libraries, especially in urban areas, have not been made. However, research shows that video games can be an invaluable tool for these organizations. Firstly, video games help to strengthen the sense of community among users and also aid in relationship building on campus. This is especially important for urban academic libraries, since it can be more challenging for libraries to stand out on campus as community nuclei when they are servicing many commuter students who may more easily overlook the campus library in favor of sources outside the institution for a sense of community.

As libraries evolve, they are no longer only places of solitary and quiet study, but are growing into central hubs which also provide spaces for collaboration and communication. Collaborative activities include group study and learning, but also encompass recreation as well. Many academic libraries include cafes or lounge areas, which are designed to serve as areas of rest, recreation, or casual study zones (McMullen, 2008; Gayton, 2008). They are not always related directly to study, but are still necessary to academic pursuits because they provide an atmosphere for much needed breaks. Leisure and breaks have been shown to be beneficial for students' overall academic success (Bergin, 1992; Rokusek & Enomoto, 2016; Bishoff, Farrell, & Neeser, 2015). Video games in academic libraries provide much-needed recreational activity to the campus community (Nicholson, 2009). They allow users to take breaks from mentally demanding studies, and students have notably recognized "a positive impact on their mental state" (Bishoff et al., 2015, p. 100) after playing video games in their academic libraries. Access to video games is only part of the allure. The opportunity to engage in these games with other gamers is ultimately what drives students to take advantage of video game collections, clubs, or events within the library. Even though many gamers have access to gaming consoles and video games at home, Brown and Kasper (2013) found that students greatly preferred participating in video game clubs within their campus libraries due to the opportunity for social play. Students therefore choose to play games on campus mainly because they can do so with others (Buchanan & Vanden Elzen, 2012). This is a major incentive for urban academic libraries to provide video game access and to host gaming clubs or events. It promotes collaborative play and provides busy commuter students with a precise reason to gather in the library.

Group gaming is not just a motivator for students, it is also a benefit. Academic libraries must facilitate collaboration to effectively serve their patrons (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011). It is not simply enough to create a space and hope that students will utilize it. Librarians must also find ways to invite students

to take advantage of the spaces provided and to "promote group study and collaboration, which is critical to student success" (Brown-Sica, 2012, p. 219). Merely providing a physical space is not a sufficient motivator for urban students to gather in the library. Busy commuter students are often frustrated with their commute and how it affects their academic lives (Regalado & Smale, 2015). Video games, which are played by a large portion of the population, including college-aged individuals, serve to bring students together in a casual setting. This lack of formality allows gamers to engage in group play, organically developing collaboration skills that can be applied to their general academic career.

A sense of community among gamers on campus naturally forms when these interactions are fostered. Since video games are often played in groups, such as via online console and PC gaming or within MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), they naturally act as community builders. These online games allow players to log on to virtual game environments to play with each other in real time. These digital play spaces are enormous, and often thousands of players or more are logged on at any given time. Gamers can find each other to play together by sharing their unique gamer tag (a unique identifier similar to a screen name). Examples of these types of online-playable games and MMOs are Battlefield, World of Warcraft, and Minecraft. Gamers may play the game together, discuss it in groups, or even play as a performance for others to watch. The growing popularity of live gaming streams via platforms such as Twitch indicates that gamers enjoy not only playing video games, but watching others play them also. The presence of active chat boxes on these streams also highlights the desire among viewers to communicate both with the player and with each other during gaming. Most importantly, these communal gaming experiences may begin with discussions centered on the game that is being played, but often shift to more personal and individual conversations (Jacobs, 2015). This indicates that these group gaming sessions provide a context in which players, viewers, and those with similar interests can build relationships. In urban academic libraries, video games can serve the same function. They can be played for recreation by lone students, but provide excellent opportunities for collaboration when played or discussed in groups. Video games can similarly help to break down walls that may exist between patrons and staff members, ultimately leading to more productive interactions, as explored below.

To foster a sense of community, video games may be played during gaming club meetings or during special events at the library. In either case, bonds naturally form among those who participate in shared interests (Adams, 2009a). By playing video games together, feelings of camaraderie increase, which creates familiarity among patrons and library staff members. In low-stakes situations, such as asking a staff member a question about how often game club meetings will occur, students are likely to feel more comfortable approaching a librarian, which can encourage them to seek assistance from library staff in the future with their research needs (Cross et al., 2015). This can be especially effective when library staff members

participate in communal video game play with patrons. Not only would this aid in forming a rapport between students and staff, it would also improve community on campus by drawing patrons together in the library. In many urban academic libraries, the majority of students commute to campus regularly, which can be tiring (Regalado & Smale, 2015). Regular commuting causes students a mental distance from the campus and a lack of community. By housing video game collections and providing spaces in which to play them, academic libraries can mitigate some of the tediousness of routine commutes by forming opportunities for recreation and social activity, all within the library. In providing access to video games and hosting game clubs and gaming events, academic libraries can become more conducive to group play and collaboration, which is a necessary function of libraries as shown by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2011).

Academic libraries must provide space that can foster collaborative learning and information creation (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011). Promoting video games can lure users to the library space to come explore the collection, play the games, and meet with others who share their interest in gaming. It is a space not only for this play, but for learning through group gaming, a form of collaboration which yields fruitful strategizing and intellectual exchanges (Waelchli, 2010). As humans continue to seek and share information on a variety of formats, it is essential that libraries evolve to support these various platforms. Again, the Association of College & Research Libraries (2011) includes this in their standards for academic libraries: "Libraries enable users to discover information in all formats through effective use of technology and organization of knowledge" (p. 11). Video games are a unique format of information that academic libraries should embrace in order to best serve their patrons. In addition to cultivating collaboration, which is applicable to all forms of learning, the sense of community that active video game collections help to create in urban academic libraries can lead to increased interaction with library sources and services. Video games are powerful catalysts for information seeking.

Video Games as Catalysts for Information Seeking and Library Use

By creating a sense of community on campus and appealing to the personal interests of students, video games can promote the use of library sources and services by attracting more users to explore the physical and digital space of their academic libraries. Nicholson (2009) found that gamers returned to the library for "non-gaming activities" (p. 210-11) after attending video game events in the same library. In his study, libraries were successful in using video game programs as "a gateway to other library services" (Nicholson, 2009, p. 211). Video game programs draw in users by appealing to their recreational interests and desire for social interaction, and provide opportunities for librarians to promote the library sources

and services. A prudent method would be to create displays highlighting library materials in relation to the content of games being offered. For example, for a gaming event centered around *The Elder Scrolls Series V: Skyrim*, a role-playing (RPG) adventure game set in an imaginary medieval Nordic continent, information sources on feudalism, Nordic history, Norse mythology, and other relevant topics might be displayed to highlight the research services and sources provided by the academic library. Similarly, gaming-specific services may be advertised as well. Perhaps signage encouraging users to ask reference librarians for gaming research sources, open access strategy guides, or other related services could be posted in the gaming section as well (Kirriemuir, 2006). Nicholson (2009) suggests more subtle strategies, such as placing food stations or sign-in sheets near eye-catching areas of relevant library materials (p. 211). Whatever the strategy employed, the presence of users in the library is a perfect opportunity for academic librarians to use the chance to promote the overall library sources and services. This is particularly important in urban academic libraries, where commuter students may spend less time on campus and may only use the library space and services when forced to by a course instructor, therefore missing out on the true extent of research and information services their academic library provides. By attracting them into the library space with video game programs, urban academic libraries can provide an exciting context in which gamers also learn more about their libraries (Kim, 2015).

A fundamentally important service of academic libraries is education in information literacy. Video games also promote this. Libraries can either "gamify" (Kim, 2015) the experience of information literacy instruction by creating a video game designed specifically to teach this skill, or they can relate the research process to gaming (Waelchli, 2010; & Margino, 2013). The act of playing a video game, according to Waelchli (2010), mirrors the research process since it requires effort and information gathering in order to achieve a specific goal. Video games therefore foster information literacy skills in a unique format. Librarians can promote the importance of information literacy to students while they are participating in video game programs. This is supported by the research study performed by Brown and Kasper (2013), in which they proved that library staff successfully used opportunities presented by students playing video games to segue into information literacy instruction. Librarians could also naturally transition into a casual discussion of the various sources and services offered by the academic library during interactions with students about gaming.

It is worthwhile to state that my intention is not to categorize video games as nothing more than a pretense which can be used for the sole purpose of attracting students into the library. This motivation to enter the library space is simply one of the many benefits of video game programs within academic libraries. In addition to promoting collaboration and information literacy, as demonstrated above, video games often spark an interest within gamers to seek other information at the library. Even without library staff intervention, it has been found that gamers who

use their library video game resources frequently check out materials related to the subject matter of the games they play (Adams, 2009a). For example, many games have historical settings, such as *Age of Empires*, and in Adams's (2009a) research, it was common for gamers who played that game to then seek books and materials related to the historical time period in which *Age of Empires* is set from their library.

Gaming can contribute to a heightened interest in general information seeking (Adams, 2009b). The willingness to search for knowledge is necessary for intellectual and academic growth, and this is an obvious benefit from video games in academic libraries. Additionally, video games supply students with diverse formats from which to seek information, either for personal or scholarly goals. Video games are increasingly being used as primary sources in both gaming studies and other multidisciplinary research (Thomas & Clyde, 2013). Academic libraries need to provide access to relevant and varied information sources in order to best serve their patrons (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011). Video games also have been found to incentivize gamers to create their own gaming materials, including supplemental strategy guides, web resources, or forums, and even original gaming content such as modifications (mods). All of these endeavors can, in turn, encourage further exploration of the library resources and capabilities. Therefore, video games stimulate discovery of new methods of information seeking and can encourage students to learn more about their libraries, including sources and services unrelated to gaming that they can access throughout their academic careers.

Conclusion

The above mentioned findings are all incredibly pertinent to urban academic libraries. Urban academic libraries often serve campuses of incredibly diverse users, and have a special responsibility as equalizers to help lessen the "digital divide" experienced by many students who lack computers with Internet access (Brown-Sica, 2012, p. 217) and gaming resources. Without access to these materials, students are at an informational disadvantage. By providing access to video games, urban academic libraries can better fulfill their duty to provide users with access to various formats of information and opportunities for information literacy and collaboration via diverse platforms. Video game programs and collections are valuable for helping students to socialize and to gain collaboration experience in the process, which is important for any academic library. Video games also help to promote library services to urban students by creating an inviting space on campus. A "sense of space" (Brown-Sica, 2012, p. 219) is essential, especially for urban academic libraries.

As I have emphasized, urban academic libraries serve many commuter students, who may not be motivated to visit their campus libraries unless absolutely necessary for a course requirement. These students are often mobile learners, and may not be inspired to study on campus or explore the library sources and services in person (Regalago & Smale, 2015). Therefore, in order to encourage urban students to fully understand the range of sources and services provided by their academic libraries, and to ensure that they feel comfortable using these libraries, librarians need to find ways to encourage them to come to the library. Video games would be an opportune addition to urban academic library collections to aid in the achievement of these goals. For all of these reasons, and for the recorded success of video games as community builders and catalysts for library sources and services discovery, video games are essential to urban academic libraries. Although there still seems to be some doubt among library stakeholders as to the intellectual value of video games, the scholarly conversation on this topic is growing, and there is an undeniable pattern of scholarship which lauds the benefits of video games in academic libraries. They are indispensable informational tools to all urban academic libraries.

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