

Lynn Sutton and H. David "Giz" Womack

# Got game?

## Hosting game night in an academic library

**E**arly one Friday evening in mid-September 2005, the normally quiet atrium of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library of Wake Forest University was filled with the sounds of Madden and Halo2, as nearly 50 gamers descended on the library. The idea to close the library on Friday night and invite gamers to play their favorite video and computer games was born several months earlier as the library's Marketing Committee was seeking ideas to reach out to students who did not ordinarily find the library until much later in the semester. What better way to reach out than to provide a venue for the favorite pastime of many college students?

### Meet the gamers

As an indication of the reach of gaming in society, the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to Robert Aumann and Thomas Schelling, two scholars who developed the use of game theory to analyze public policy. In 2004, the gaming industry outpaced the film industry in total sales. Gamers now outnumber baby boomers 90 million to 77 million. Researchers have begun to describe how gaming has affected a whole generation of learners.<sup>1</sup> Society may have judged this generation too quickly as having a short attention span. In fact, they may just be multi-tasking faster than the rest of us and are likely plain bored with the lecture method that still predominates in teaching. One curious question to examine is why there appears to be a significant gender gap in gaming.<sup>2</sup> At the gaming event described here, only one female gamer showed up to participate. Those who study the gaming generation call them motivated, resilient, confident, sociable and analytical, all of which have implications for library service.<sup>3</sup>

Gaming as a social phenomenon has been discussed in recent library literature. Feature articles have appeared in *Library Journal* and the OCLC Newsletter.<sup>4,5</sup> Since gaming is most popular with youth, public and school libraries have taken the lead in promoting electronic games as part of young adult services. For example, the librarian at North Hunterdon Regional High School has been holding game nights in the school cafeteria for two years.<sup>6</sup> Academic libraries have not been as active in the gaming environment, but their time has come, as the toddlers who grew up with Super Mario in the late 1980s are now college undergraduates.

### Organizing and marketing the event

Staff members in the library's Information Technology Center (ITC) are responsible for supporting the university's Blackboard course management system, as well as for training faculty and students in a wide range of topics, including an award-winning Thinkpad orientation program, mobile technology, blogging, spam filtering, Endnote, Web design, and many other emerging technology issues. ITC staff immediately and enthusiastically embraced the idea of a game night in the library.

The ITC technology training coordinator contacted the university's Resident Technology Advisors (RTAs), a crew of students who assist other students living in the residence halls with the effective use of computers and who are responsible for providing technology

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A view of the library before game night.

programs to students. The RTAs were very enthusiastic about the gaming idea, although they were less than enthusiastic about the original title for the event, Games @ Your Library. They suggested ZSR-RTA Challenge, giving us visions of mud wrestling or at best a tug-of-war. We compromised on Get Game @ ZSR, which the head RTA declared to be cool, trendy, new, fresh, and excellent. Game night was set for the second Friday in September, when freshmen were still new enough to look for ways to meet people.

The RTAs were instrumental in devising a way to network the equipment so larger numbers of students could play the same game. The chosen venue was the library's beautiful atrium, with Halo2 on Xbox on one side and Madden 2006 on Sony PlayStation2 on the other. Students who brought in their own games could spread out to one of the surrounding group study rooms. With seven LCD projectors and screens available, we planned to take 28 reservations and allow others to watch or rotate in. Students were asked to bring their own game consoles, controllers, and games.

The RTAs were also charged with marketing the event, which they did by placing posters in the residence halls, talking it up with students, and posting an official event in the student Web site's weekly calendar. Perhaps the most effective marketing tool was a direct e-mail to all freshmen the week before the event. As soon as the e-mail went out, reservations started coming in.

One student replied to the message, I just wanted to let you know that I think this video game night is a great idea! Unfortunately I will be gone Friday night, but I just want to encourage the idea and hope that even if the turnout isn't outstanding you will arrange to have another one later in the semester. I will certainly come to the next one, even if I am the lone female gamer. I have been to other schools' video game LAN nights, and they are very popular.

I'm so glad to see this coming to Wake. Please let me know of any future game nights.

### Game night

Promptly at 7:00 p.m. on Friday, when the library normally closed for the night, the gamers began arriving at the library door, controllers in hand. A greeter ushered them in to the atrium where their registration status was checked, and they were shown to their assigned station. Most people had signed up with friends to play a specific game, but others came in singly and were assigned randomly. The games began immediately. Halo2 on Xbox was by far the most popular. The RTAs had networked four game consoles on the right side of the atrium so four-person groups could play by themselves or play against the larger group. By the end of the night, 16 students were playing the same game against each other. Around 9:00 p.m., a boy and his girlfriend arrived lugging his large desktop computer and monitor so he could play computer games by himself but in the middle of the crowd, which he proceeded to do for the rest of the night.

Library rules prohibiting food were relaxed for the night, and the promise of free food was part of the draw for some students. The library provided free pizza, soft drinks, and cookies in the middle of the atrium, dividing the Halo2 and Madden players. Twelve pizzas were consumed in the first hour and by the end of the night, 20 pizzas had been eaten.

In addition to the eight RTAs who served as technical support, six volunteer staff members

roamed the event as troubleshooters and food replenishers. Troubleshooting proved necessary as two power failures were encountered when circuits were overloaded. This only served as a convenient pizza break for the gamers, while staff raced from one electrical closet to another looking for the right breaker. Eventually, power was re-routed to avoid overload and the games continued.

Conveniently, the large-group Halo2 game ended right at 11:00 p.m. and we announced the event was over. Gamers politely picked up their controllers, thanked us profusely, and asked when the next game night would take place. We are very sure they would have played all night in the atrium had we not sent them home.

### Feedback and evaluation

By all accounts, Get Game @ ZSR was a smashing success. Feedback from the gamers who attended was uniformly positive. In the days following the event, ITC staffers were stopped on campus by participants who wanted to thank the library again and ask when the next game night was scheduled. A faculty member who heard about it went out of his way to say what a great idea it was for an academic unit to sponsor a fun evening event for students. Anecdotal evidence indicates that students participating in the event were not regular library users and thus the marketing effort was successful.

One student asked that night why we in the library were being so nice to students. Was it a publicity stunt, he asked?

One totally unexpected outcome of the event was the number of students who tried to come in and use the library after closing time on Friday night. While the two 24-hour study rooms remained open, we turned away a surprising number of students who wanted to look things up or check things out. They looked at us, unbelieving, when we said studying was not allowed, only gaming!

Total cost of the event was approximately \$425, divided evenly between rental of the screens and purchase of the food. Fortunately,

the university's Information Systems unit donated six older LCD projectors, which though old and a little fuzzy, still did the job at no cost.

### What will we do differently next time?

While pleased with the success of the initial game night, there are a few things staff would do differently next time:

Consider hosting a Halo2 tournament, complete with trophies and prizes.

Publicize earlier and in more places that students notice.

Bring or rent newer versions of Madden sports games.

Borrow additional Xbox and PS2 consoles to have on hand for walk-in players.

Take a nap on the afternoon of the event; the staffers were worn out at 11:00 p.m.!



Gamers compete in the library's atrium with Xbox on one side and Sony PlayStation 2 on the other.

### Conclusion

The experience of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library indicates that with a modicum of effort and expense, a successful and fun gaming event can take place in an academic library without sacrificing the dignity of the institution. Instead, the library gains credibility with its students and demonstrates its relevance in the fast-paced digital world. The next question libraries should ask themselves: Got game?

### Notes

1. Marc Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

2. Denise E. Agosto, Girls and Gaming: A Summary of the Research with Implications for Practice, *Teacher Librarian* 31 (2004): 8-14.

3. John C. Beck, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).

4. Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkue-

hler, Meet the Gamers, *Library Journal* 130 (2005): 38-41.

5. The Big Bang, OCLC Newsletter No. 267 (2005): 7-12.

6. Games @ Your Library. Available at [www.nexgenlibrarian.net/popculture/2005/04/games-your-library.html](http://www.nexgenlibrarian.net/popculture/2005/04/games-your-library.html). *~*

*("Borrowing from the balcony," continued from page 167)*

I managed to attend at a pivotal point in my career. I had been in a director position for more than five years and going through the personal questioning of whether I was in the right position. However, it is always great when some of your leadership behaviors are affirmed, and you are able to tell yourself that indeed you can successfully do your job. As the same time, one discovers new insights, and I began to appreciate approaches I had never consciously considered before. The faculty delivering the program were exceptional teachers and they and the program required you to stretch. Intensive programs like the institute are a marvelous way to get reinvigorated and refocused. The position of director of libraries is very isolated within the academy, and over time it is possible to lose direction, or at least be following a tangent that is not core and for me; it is necessary to step away from the day-to-day and take the time to re-evaluate. Realizing this need, attending the institute was a major personal benefit . . . I have utilized the lessons of reframing many times . . . John Teskey, class of 1999

It is clear from my conversations with alumni that the value of the institute is enduring, given its focus on developing within attendees a framework for analyzing situations and developing strategies to address them regardless of the nature, size, or circumstance of an institution or an individual's leadership position. Whether one is a new leader or a mature leader, continuing to broaden and

deepen skills is essential to professional vitality. The ACRL Harvard Leadership Institute understands and fosters this; how remarkable to see past participants still inspired by what they learned years after their week in Cambridge. That's a remarkable educational experience of real value.

### Thank you

I would like to thank institute alumni Lee Van Orsdel, John Teskey, Rebecca Donlan, Ed Garten, Linda Masselink, and my colleagues from the 2005 class, Michael Somers, Ann Riley, and Carlos Melian for sharing their perspectives. *~*

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