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Lending Video Game Consoles in an Academic Library

Ryan Buller

abstract: This paper will outline the process and discussions undertaken at the University of Denver's University Libraries to implement a lending service providing video game consoles. Faculty and staff at the University Libraries decided to pursue the new lending service, though not a traditional library offering, to support the needs of a video game design curriculum in the Emergent Digital Practices program. By rethinking the role and scope of the library collection, the library met the demonstrated needs of an emerging program and reinforced its usefulness to the campus community.

Introduction

In May 2015, the University of Denver's University Libraries instituted a new service to support interdepartmental courses aimed at video game design and creation. The new service provided video game consoles for circulation to the university community. The decision to offer this new resource was aided by a grant from the University Libraries Association awarded to a professor in the Emergent Digital Practices program. This grant would help pay for the building of a video game collection in the University Libraries to support the academic pursuits of the Emergent Digital Practices program in video game creation. A cornerstone of this grant was that it would incorporate many different aspects of video game creation, including programming, design, writing, and music, thus bringing a truly interdepartmental approach to this fledgling program. Administrators and faculty at the University Libraries became convinced that the library could contribute substantially to this endeavor.

After meeting with the grant recipient, the University Libraries decided that their contribution to this project would be the acquisition and circulation of video game consoles to the University of Denver community. The library purchased and deployed the devices to support the academic needs of students, staff, and faculty members in the Emergent Digital Practices program. A number of questions and concerns underlay the conversations regarding the library's contribution. This paper will explore some of those conversations and look at the library's rationale for launching the new service. Additionally, challenges of implementing the lending service will be explored along with the opportunities that this project has afforded.

Literature Review

Total revenues for the video game industry in 2015 came in at \$23.5 billion.¹ As this market has grown over the last few decades, academic libraries have looked to support the emerging academic programs meant to educate the next generation of video game designers and developers. As a result, video games have become more common in a variety of libraries. Additionally, the growth of video game sales has resulted in a greater demand for people who can create in the medium, leading to an increase in academic programs nationwide centered on video game design. While it is difficult to get an exact count on the number of schools offering this type of curriculum, *Forbes* reports that the *Princeton Review* examined over 150 programs nationally and internationally to compile its ranking of video game design programs.² Some of the top programs in the country have emerged at such schools as the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the University of Central Florida in Orlando, and Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Within the academic and professional literature, the primary approaches to gaming collections and consoles in libraries offer advice about purchasing equipment, opportunities for libraries to offer programming around gaming, and building collections to support curricular needs. “The Big Three: Next Generation Video Consoles” offers advice on the generation of video game consoles available on the market in 2007. The author, Kelly Czarnecki, discusses the pros and cons of the Microsoft Xbox 360, Sony PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii.³ Shawn McCann’s column in *Library Journal*, “Systems Showdown,” compares the same three consoles.⁴ Both authors give advice to help librarians determine which console would best fit the needs of the library. The authors focus their recommendations on programs using the consoles as a means to entice more patrons into the library. Czarnecki suggests “tournaments, after-school activities, intergenerational programs, and movie viewing” as ways to utilize the consoles within libraries.⁵

Early approaches in the library literature also focused on the use of video game consoles to attract a new generation and demographic of users into libraries, especially public libraries. In her 2006 article “What Does an Xbox Have to Do with Reading?” Elizabeth Beales explained how the Barossa Council Public Library in Nuriootpa, South Australia, set up an Xbox console as a way to entice young men into the library.⁶ By focusing on optimizing the set-up of consoles in libraries, authors sought to assist librarians in introducing the new service. In another 2006 article, “Gaming Setups Common in Libraries,” Jenny Levine highlighted different configurations for video game consoles in a library to facilitate cooperative game play.⁷ The

examples provided by Levine would work for both academic and public libraries because she focused on how to configure the hardware to allow multiple users to play together. Both Beales and Levine attempted to ease the way for libraries whose staff might lack a background in video games to offer that service.

Academic libraries have also experimented with best practices for building gaming collections. The academic literature has approached this topic in different ways. In their article “Building Next Generation Video Game Collections in Academic Libraries,” Mary Laskowski and David Ward examined how academic libraries can develop their circulating video game collections to “meet the needs of academic instructors and researchers.”⁸ Their discussion of hardware specifically related to the need to have “a broad spectrum of platforms in order to reach the most patrons.”⁹ They explained the need for multiple titles on different platforms and the impact on a library’s collection budget of growing its video game collection.

In 2012, Diane Robson and Patrick Durkee discussed collection development and planning for future needs in their article “New Directions for Academic Video Game Collections.” They predicted that libraries would move beyond console-based games to Internet games and reported on the creation of a gaming lab at the University of North Texas Library in Denton. They wrote, “We believe that an essential part of building a vibrant gaming collection is making spaces within the library for gaming, integrating the gaming collection into the fabric of academic life in the university library.”¹⁰ While they talked about their desire for an Xbox 360 Kinect camera, they did not report what hardware is used in the gaming lab nor explain their decisions on the hardware used.

Finally, Christopher Thomas and Jerremie Clyde took a different approach to burgeoning video game collections in academic libraries. In their article “Game as Book: Selecting Video Games for Academic Libraries Based on Discipline Specific Knowledge,” Thomas and Clyde discussed collection development based on the content of the games, rather than on the format. They wrote, “If video games contain discipline specific content then academic libraries should consider including video games in their collections as secondary or tertiary sources.”¹¹ By focusing on how video games may contain scholarly content, the authors applied collection development practices for traditional monographic materials to the video game genre.

Reexamining What the Library Collection Means

What a library collects and circulates to its community is tied directly to the mission of the library. In the case of the University Libraries at the University of Denver, we are charged with supporting the curricular needs of the faculty, staff, and students at the university. After viewing the library collection through this lens, it became clear that the library must support the developing needs of the video game design and creation classes at the University of Denver.

While libraries can make content on the subject available to faculty and students, the content may not necessarily meet their needs. As Olivia Miller demonstrated in her article “Collecting Library Resources for Video Game Design Students,” students within the discipline of video game design are more apt to utilize online resources than to use library-based text resources.¹² This is partly due to the traditional lag times in scholarly publishing compared to the rapid reporting in online, nonscholarly resources. As a result, academic libraries are challenged to identify nontraditional means that can meet the needs of these students. Just because

traditional publishing options may not meet students' needs does not mean that the library has no role to play.

The other aspect to consider in respect to the changing nature of library collections is what tools patrons will need to access content. In this case, video game consoles can be cost-prohibitive to some students. As a result, students may find that the video games in the library collection that are necessary to review for class are essentially inaccessible. Therefore, librarians realized that they must ensure that students in the video game design courses had the required hardware to access the games they needed to analyze for their curricular needs. This approach mirrored the need for libraries to collect hardware to provide access to material in other formats, such as microfilm readers, record players for long-playing albums (LPs), or viewing systems for VHS (video home system) tapes.

Another question was how libraries should look at collecting and circulating materials meant for individual, customized, personal use. There are multiple examples of these types of materials circulating in academic libraries, and libraries often allow patrons to customize the material for their specific needs, especially laptops and iPads. In the iPad 2 lending service at the Texas A&M University Medical Sciences Library in College Station, users requested the ability to customize the iPads by downloading applications that were relevant to the user.¹³ Similarly, the laptops that libraries lend are highly customizable. To protect their laptops, the library at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, uses an application called DeepFreeze that will restore settings and delete files that have been installed or downloaded onto the computers by a patron.¹⁴ With this approach, the library allows patrons to utilize these materials to their fullest extent, while still protecting library resources and material from damage. Emporia State's

procedure appears to be an appropriate compromise for allowing customization while still protecting the library's investment.

Clearly there was a role for the library to play in supporting the curricular needs of the video game design program. Once we had collectively decided that this role did fit within the traditional library paradigm, we could determine how the library could best support the needs of students in the program. In so doing, we met the overall mission of the academic library, to support the curricular needs of the faculty, staff, and students at the University of Denver.

To Circulate or to Have Dedicated Library Space?

After deciding to purchase video game consoles, we considered whether to lend consoles or to have a permanent library space dedicated to gaming. There were compelling arguments on each side of this question. Two main factors supported having a dedicated space in the library for the video game consoles. The first factor was that it would allow the library to have greater control over the use and care of the consoles. Consoles have evolved into sophisticated, powerful computers that require great care and attention to function properly over the long term. The other main factor was that the dedicated space would allow students in the program who did not own a television to benefit from using the consoles. While televisions have dropped in price over the last decade, an economic entry barrier still remains for students who cannot afford a set. By having a dedicated space, the library would eliminate that barrier, ensuring that all students in the program could engage with the newly acquired consoles.

There were also drawbacks to the library supplying a physical space. The first problem was that the University Libraries at the University of Denver occupy a recently renovated building, employing the academic commons model. The Academic Commons houses a number of different service points not related to the library, such as writing assistance and mathematics

tutoring, in a single location to centralize useful services for students. This approach has succeeded so well at the University of Denver that many other service points want space in the commons, and space is limited. Implementing a dedicated gaming space in the library would require, at the least, taking a group study room off-line. There were concerns about this action because group study rooms have become highly popular. Additionally, using a group study room would create a space that would only accommodate the usage of one console at a time. Access and use of the consoles would be strictly limited. Given that some of the consoles monitor the movement of players in physical space, the option of adding additional screens in the space did not seem realistic.

The other approach under consideration was to circulate the video game consoles to patrons. This approach would allow patrons to take the consoles out of the library and back to their dorm room or home. As with the approach of creating a dedicated space, there were positives and negatives to this approach. On the positive side, allowing the consoles to circulate would give patrons more time with the hardware in their academic pursuits. Lending the consoles would enable greater usage and understanding of the limits and possibilities of the different devices, and how those could be leveraged in the design and creation of video games. Further, this approach would allow patrons to use the hardware in its designed setting and take advantage of the different capabilities of the hardware.

After careful consideration, the library determined that the better approach would be to circulate the game consoles, as opposed to creating a dedicated gaming space in the library. Ultimately, this decision was made based on the motivation for purchasing the consoles. Had the library approached this conversation with a motivation of enticing patrons into the library, a dedicated gaming space would have made more sense. However, the library approached the

acquisition of video game consoles with an eye to supporting the academic needs of an interdisciplinary approach to video game creation. In this, the library determined that students and faculty would need more time to use, study, and critique how different video games took advantage of the hardware. Additionally, the library decided that the concerns discussed over circulating the consoles could be mitigated. Ultimately, the approach of circulating video game consoles as a pilot project meant that library faculty and staff would be able to reevaluate the approach at a later date to determine the level of success and to revise the approach as necessary.

Deciding on Hardware

The next step of the project was to decide what specific hardware the library would purchase in support of the video game collection. One of the main objectives of the awarded grant was for students to look at the same game on different consoles and on different generations of the same console. With this purpose in mind, the library determined that it was important to purchase a variety of consoles and generations. Ultimately, the library bought Sony PlayStation 3, Sony PlayStation 4, Microsoft Xbox 360, Microsoft Xbox One, Nintendo Wii, and Nintendo Wii U. This gave the library the current and previous generation of devices from each major producer of video game consoles. The purchases would allow for appropriate comparisons of the same games between different consoles and different generations of consoles from the same maker.

Based on the recommendation of the faculty member from the Emergent Digital Practices program, the library purchased five GAEMS Personal Gaming Environments, each of which consisted of a portable screen and speakers built into a hard plastic case designed to house each console. The environments were used for the Sony PlayStation 4, Sony PlayStation 3, Microsoft Xbox One, Microsoft Xbox 360, and Nintendo Wii U. The Nintendo Wii did not provide the correct output for the game environment, so the library separately purchased a secure carrying

case for that console. The environments would allow the consoles to be secured in a sturdy, waterproof plastic case. A patron who wished to use the console could simply plug in the console and the game environment, and use the built-in screen in the game environment. The library also purchased an additional carrying case for each console for peripheral materials, such as cords, cables, and controllers.

The decision-making process behind choosing the specific hardware took multiple points into account. It was important to make sure that the consoles obtained complemented the curricular needs of the Video Game Design program. By purchasing the two most recent versions of the three major console producers, we ensured that students could compare the same game on different console types and on different generations of consoles from the same producer. Additionally, it was important to the library to protect our investment and to open it up to as many students as possible. We accomplished this objective by the purchase of the GAEMS gaming environments. They served the dual purpose of offering exceptional protection to the consoles and also providing a built-in screen for students who might not have access to a television.

Circulating

Once the decisions had been made to circulate the consoles and what types of hardware to purchase, the next step was to determine the lending parameters for the consoles. After discussion, the library determined that the lending length of the consoles should mirror that of the video games purchased with the grant. The video games circulate for one week at a time and were allowed two renewals. Other interested patrons can place a hold on a title, which prevents the current borrower from renewing the item. This policy would give patrons ample time with the hardware and software combination. Additionally, having the same lending length would

limit confusion on due dates for patrons using this material. Because this was a new service and there was little information in the academic literature, faculty and staff at the University Libraries were unsure how popular this new service would be. Therefore, the two groups held a conversation regarding how to make sure patrons could check out these items. If the service proved popular, the material might become difficult for patrons to check out. Therefore, the library decided to make it possible for patrons to place holds on the video game consoles. This would ensure that all patrons would have equal access to the material and that no one borrower could monopolize the hardware, thus preventing other students from gaining access to the material they needed for their studies.

Challenges of Implementation

As with any significant change, such as creating a new service, there were a variety of challenges to be addressed and overcome. The most visible challenges included patron accountability and software security on the various consoles.

In regard to accountability, it was important to ensure that all components of the console and the gaming environment came back when borrowers returned the material. The exclusion of a single cord could prevent the next patron from using the system. For this reason, the library established an extensive check-in process to ensure patron accountability. Forms were created for each console, including pictures of each item in the system. This would allow anyone on the library staff to check in the consoles, as opposed to only those with extensive knowledge of video game consoles. The other aspect of patron accountability was to ensure that the hardware of the consoles was not compromised. Video game consoles have developed into powerful computing systems. As such, it is possible to replace various hardware components within the consoles. An extensive list of serial numbers is maintained on all aspects of the consoles' inner

workings to ensure that parts are not replaced within the consoles. This precaution prevents people from substituting nonoperational components from their home system into the library's systems, as well as to ensure that the hardware from the consoles could not be sold. These serial numbers are verified after every circulation to ensure that the consoles return in the same condition as when they are lent.

Another challenge of implementation was ensuring the security and safety on the software side of the consoles. Users log in to each system with their own unique gamer profiles. This allows them to use the consoles online, to purchase content through the consoles' online stores, and to customize the software of each console. As such, the library created user accounts for each console that are maintained by library staff. These accounts were set up to prevent additional accounts that could lock out the default library accounts. This allowed patrons to log in with their own credentials to access their profiles and online content but prevented them from locking other users out. When consoles are returned, the software is checked to ensure that all gamer profiles loaded into the system are logged out. This was an important step because some users store credit card information on their profiles to allow for online purchases in game marketplaces. No console is allowed to recirculate until library staff have checked the hardware and software. While this policy does slow the rate at which the consoles circulate, it was a necessary step to ensure the consoles were returned in good condition and to protect patrons from fraudulent charges to the credit cards associated with their gamer profile. In this, the University Libraries was consistent with the previously discussed approaches of libraries circulating customizable materials, such as laptops and iPads, while protecting patron privacy and the physical equipment.

A final challenge to discuss was internal resistance to the video game console lending service. Some staff felt that this was not an appropriate service for the library to offer. Their concerns were primarily focused on the initial start-up costs, as well as the shift away from collecting traditional library materials. The costs were discussed with the concerned staff members by highlighting the costs of different materials in the library and showing the circulation, or lack thereof, of some of those items. This discussion helped to reiterate to staff members that we could directly support demonstrated curricular needs and ensure a certain level of circulation for the investment, which was not always guaranteed with the traditional modes of purchasing library materials. The second staff concern, an expansion of the material we collect, was addressed by examining the needs of the Emerging Digital Practices program with staff. By explaining that the purchases were not intended to increase interest in the library or to attract a certain demographic of library patron, but rather to meet the needs of a fledgling academic program, we helped satisfy the stated concerns. This approach also allowed us to engage front-end staff in a conversation about what role the library plays in our community. By having this discussion, we could reiterate that we are here to meet all the curricular needs of the university, not just those that could be met by books and journals.

Opportunities

While this project presented a number of challenges, it also provided a number of opportunities for faculty and staff at the University Libraries. The first major opportunity was that the library was given the opportunity to directly support the curricular goals of an emerging program. This support allowed the library to become a partner in an effort meant to bring different departments together in pursuit of a new, engaging curriculum. By involving the faculty in the Emerging Digital Practices program, library faculty and staff could directly support the curricular needs of

the program. By identifying a way in which the library could support the program and by making that support a reality, the likelihood of other departments coming forward with their own needs should increase, creating more opportunities for the University Libraries to collaborate with, support, and engage various departments on campus.

The second significant opportunity that this project provided was to reinforce the concept that the role of the academic library is to support the curricular needs of the various, and changing, departments on campus. As these needs evolve over time, the faculty and staff at the University of Denver have demonstrated to our community that we can not only adapt to change but also meet the shifting expectations of what services an academic library should provide. By demonstrating flexibility, the faculty and staff at the University Libraries position themselves to address future changes to the curricular needs of the campus community.

Finally, the opportunity to discuss the role of the library as it relates to the University of Denver proved to be a wonderful opportunity for staff and faculty members alike. Ultimately, the ability to challenge our collective preconceived notions, and to examine how the role and expectations of the library were changing, proved fruitful for all members of the organization. By working together, engaging in honest dialogue, and collaborating with partners across campus, faculty and staff in the University Libraries at the University of Denver could put aside differing opinions to support an emerging academic discipline.

Conclusion

To this point, the console lending service has been a success. The consoles have met the library's expectations regarding circulation numbers, even without a formal campaign to publicize the new service. Instead, the library relied on word of mouth from the faculty and students in the Video Game Design program and from library faculty and staff to promote the new collection.

The thorough double-checking system has ensured that the consoles remain in good condition and meet the needs of both students and faculty. The service has been so successful that the library has expanded its hardware holdings to include additional controllers for each console based on feedback from students. Additionally, the faculty member awarded the original grant used to purchase the video games received an additional grant that will be used to further increase the library's holdings.

Few of us expected that a meeting about what video games to purchase for a grant recipient would turn into an overarching conversation regarding the changing nature of library collections within an academic library, nor that it would result in an entirely new lending service for the University of Denver community. By collaborating with faculty from another department, faculty and staff at the University Libraries demonstrated a commitment to the curricular needs of an academic program by providing a new service. While the new service expanded the suite of services offered by the library, it was fundamentally rooted in the mission of the library, to “support the teaching, research, scholarship, and creative endeavors by providing diverse resources and services for all stages of the information lifecycle.”¹⁵

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Notes

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