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Games People Play

Peter Bremer

Games bring people together. For years, Rodney A. Briggs Library has been hosting monthly game nights and inviting our students to come play tabletop games such as Dixit and Codenames. Although a staff of five librarians all take part in staffing this event, I am the primary individual responsible for planning and coordinating this popular activity. This past January I decided to try something new that reached beyond the confines of our small campus at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Instead of focusing just on our students, I expanded the scope and set up a special Game Day at the local public library. Why? Because “including gaming programs in libraries helps keep libraries current” (Werner, 2013, p. 800) and can bring patrons through your doors that might not otherwise come. Partnerships also tend to expand a potential audience and can foster future collaboration.

It all started when I reached out to the new Morris Public Library director and asked if she would be interested in collaborating on a tabletop gaming event. As a Morris Public Library Board member, I knew the director had an interest in reaching out to the community and attracting segments of the population that were underserved. She has also quickly made a name for herself as being innovative and energetic. Almost immediately, the director signaled her interest in pursuing a joint gaming venture between the two libraries and we began planning.

From the beginning, it was important to us that the event be inclusive. We wanted everyone to feel comfortable and welcome, whether that be families, young adults, children, college students, or adults. We also knew that teenagers would be the toughest group to entice through the public library doors. To attract the most diverse gamers we needed to make sure that there was a large array of games for young and old alike. Our focus was on board and card

games since we did not have the resources to venture into video games. Tabletop games are in the middle of a renaissance and are very popular. Sales of hobby games in the U.S. and Canada reached nearly 1.2 billion in 2015 according to ICv2 (Griep, 2016).

Many tabletop titles came from Briggs Library's extensive collection as well from games we personally owned. Some examples included Risk, Monopoly, checkers, chess, Clue, Cranium, Forbidden Island, Dominion, Exploding Kittens, Apples to Apples, Bananagrams, and Welcome to the Dungeon. Since this was a family-friendly event, I left some of our more adult-orientated games like Cards Against Humanity back in the library. One rule that we tried to follow whenever possible was keep it simple. As Werner mentions in the article "Bringing Them In: Developing a Gaming Program for the Library", it is wise to "focus on games that can be completed quickly, this keeps patrons from getting bored or being unable to finish their game during the program" (2013, p. 792).

Free food is one of the best ways to get people to come to an event and for gamers this is doubly true. "Any gamer will tell you that large amounts of junk food are a necessity to their very existence. If you are not stocked with the basic three—soda chips, and cookies—be very, very worried" (King, 2007, p. 510). For our first joint Game Day we aimed to pull out all the stops and planned for pizza, snacks and soda. The Friends of the Morris Public Library and Briggs Library Associates agreed to pay for the refreshments, which helped greatly, since there is no budget for gaming activities in either library. An ample supply of cups, plates and napkins was also purchased.

To maximize the number of community members participating, we decided early on to host the event at the public library. The Morris Public Library has a large meeting room spacious enough to accommodate 40 people comfortably with a door that can be closed to help contain the

noise. The library building itself is centrally located, making it easy for folks in the community to join us. Having Game Day at the university library would have meant few, if any, community members in attendance since Morris residents are often reticent about venturing onto campus. Our town/gown divide is quite pronounced. Locals often refer to the University of Minnesota, Morris campus as being on a hill, which only increases the perceived separation. The irony is that the university is only negligibly on higher ground and actually shares this alpine altitude with the local public schools. Because these two spheres can be somewhat isolated, having a joint gaming event with the university library reaching out to its public counterpart would be beneficial in tearing down barriers.

We made sure to include our partnership prominently in all publicity as well as include examples of games and the fact that there would be pizza. The poster design was colorful and inviting, benefiting from the fact that the public library director is also an artist. Then we hung advertisements around town as well as on-campus. After checking the community calendar for competition, we scheduled our event for the last Saturday in January from 11:00 a.m. until the library closed at 5:00 p.m. Publicity occurred in the local newspaper, on various social media platforms, on both library websites, and on the radio. A Saturday made sense to us since we thought it would be more conducive to getting folks out of their homes than a dark weekday evening in the middle of winter.

All the publicity in the world doesn't guarantee a successful event, however. As I carried armloads of games into the public library and set up tables, I found myself wondering if anyone would show up. Would we get a handful of hardcore gamers and a lot of leftover pizza? Before long the answer was clear; people were excited about the event. Gamers filled the community room to bursting. More tables were hurriedly set up. I scurried from group to group helping folks

decide on a game, explaining rules and even joining in if a certain number of players was required. Looking around after a quick game of Welcome to the Dungeon with some elementary students was finished, I was pleased at the variety of people in attendance. There were college students, adults from the community and university, as well as quite a few younger kids. About the only group that didn't have much representation was teens. Even so, Game Day was by almost any measure a resounding success. Gamers devoured pizzas in record time and tables remained full the entire afternoon. Best of all, people were really enjoying themselves. If someone looked a little lost and didn't know what to play, either the director or myself would try and connect them with a good game.

One thing about games; they don't generally adhere to a rigid schedule. Because of this, there were several groups still playing at the library's closing time. We simply reminded them that the library was closing and that they would have to wrap things up. It helped that the library director was flexible about staying open a few extra minutes to get everyone out the door. When the last child was finally picked up by their parents, we breathed a sigh of relief at a job well done.

Although we were very pleased with the turnout and reception to our first Game Day, we would do several things differently the next time around. Having more games aimed at younger elementary school children was definitely a priority. We were simply overwhelmed with the number of young children and did not have nearly enough games suitable for their age group. Part of the reason for this was that many of our games came from the academic Briggs Library and tended to have an adult or teen focus. Titles like Trouble, Battleship, Life and Candyland would go a long way to shoring up our deficit in this area. BoardGameGeek is a great place to

search online for more game titles. Next time we might borrow games from friends or colleagues, or even buy them used.

We still need to attract more teenagers to our Game Day event. Few young adults showed up despite heavy publicity, including social media. In the future, we plan to brainstorm other ways of communicating with this group, perhaps even targeting them more pointedly in the advertisements. Identifying teen gamers would give us possible insight into what would entice them to attend a library event. Perhaps we could even hold a special gaming event just for their demographic.

Later this spring we plan to have another Game Day, making it even better than the first one. Because we do not want to wear out our welcome with our Friends organizations, we may dial-back on the pizza and just have snacks and soda. If only we could pass Go and collect \$200! Every event is a roll of the dice, but we think we are off to a pretty good start.

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