

Games, Makerspaces, and Open Catalogues:

Three intersections of technology, people, libraries and play

Games:

Games are excellent ways to develop socialisation, systems literacy and theory of mind; perhaps more important for public libraries, they are a very effective way to foster community.

But there is still a stigma attached to games as “frivolous”, “trivial” (which they can be, but so can books, and Wodehouse shows that “frivolous” can still be gloriously good).

For this reason, buying a few well-known games and advertising a time for people to meet to play is going to be hit-and-miss. (In particular, the best-known boardgames are a long way from being the best.) And as with books, even the “best” are made better by the company of people who can engage critically with them, and talk intelligently about them.

Find people who already know and love a variety of games (electronic and other – and these may not be the same people). Chances are you have one, and probably more, on staff! Give them the chance to run groups for their fellow gamers. (And/or get training in what games are out there and how they can be used. I can help, or reach out to local game stores and gaming groups.)

Or organise a games club as you would a book club – the group meets to play, certainly, but also to discuss the game – its history, the kinds of skills it uses and decisions it requires you to make, and so on. If a game as simple as chess can inspire a 13,000-item collection at the SLV, there is certainly potential for a half-hour-to-hour conversation about the many excellent games out there that people have probably not even tried.

For non-electronic games, boardgamegeek.com and its satellite sites are a pretty good starting point. For electronic games, there is a lot of intelligent conversation at the game developer site gamasutra.com; although quite a bit of the content is highly technical, you can just ignore that stuff, and there are some very interesting conversations (and great roundups of other activity on the web). The Penny Arcade Report (thepareport.com) is also good, But be warned: the webcomic it's attached to is a gamer touchstone, and part of that is its penchant for pushing certain boundaries; even when it's not NSFW (which it very much is sometimes) it can be offensive.

That said, Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) is coming to Melbourne this July – if you can still get tickets, you should definitely send someone.

Electronic games

Electronic games obviously require extra infrastructure and support. If they're online games, they also require a certain amount of oversight. There is some fairly toxic culture online, and it manifests often around games – although gamers and game makers are pushing back against it and are well ahead of the mainstream in some respects.

But online games also offer opportunities to learn teamwork and leadership at quite a high level. And electronic games, multiplayer and single-player, offer opportunities to learn useful creative and programming skills and even (in some cases) to make money from them.

Electronic games also have yet to establish a successful e-lending paradigm. This offers libraries an opportunity to take the initiative in the way we failed to do with e-books – for which we are now literally paying the price, a mistake I am keen for us to avoid repeating! I am working with the PLVN's ICT SIG and Collections Co-op on this – if you're interested contact me.

Makerspaces:

Makerspaces (aka makelabs, hacklabs, hackerspaces) offer an important hands-on technological complement to the self-directed learning of the library.

(Don't be put off by the term "hacker". It's originally an honourable term that just means "techie who finds ingeniously creative solutions" – i.e. MacGyver. It's being consciously reclaimed from the mainstream who have taken it to mean electronic criminals – some of whom *are* hackers, certainly, but treating them as equivalent is like using the term "master engraver" for forgers.)

Makers are obviously pretty tech-savvy, so searching online for "makerspace" or "hackerspace" should get you good contacts. (I've found the master list at hackerspace.org to be the best one.) I've approached a few makerspaces in the course of preparing this presentation, and they are consistently interested in the idea of working with libraries.

Open Catalogues:

This is something I am exploring; I'm not aware of anyone else pursuing this line of thought as yet. That means that if you're interested, you'll need to get in touch with me.

I'm also aware that it's likely to be the most eyebrow-raising of the ideas in this presentation. That's fine. Even if the idea presented here is of no interest, it might spark some better ideas down the line.

About me:

Trained as a historian, my career began in arts production and publishing. I digressed into human rights activism, and then into library work at the City of Port Phillip, where I worked in Library IT. In 2011 I won a study grant to travel to the USA to look at games in libraries; I retired from City of Port Phillip at the end of 2012 to pursue other interests, including games-related events and training, freelance and self-employed game writing, and freelance editing.