

# Video Games as a Service

## THREE YEARS LATER

► ERIN V. HELMRICH AND ELI NEIBURGER

In 2004, we started a new service at Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan: video game tournament events. Initially our tournaments were based on a single game (**Mario Kart**) and intended for teenagers. Now, heading into our fourth annual tournament season, our service has grown to feature fifteen different games. It delivers more than thirty events per year, including tournaments for elementary schoolers, twenty-somethings, adults, parents, and whole families. Our tournament database contains records of more than 700 unique players, 2,800 instances of a player registering for an event, and more than 10,000 match scores. That's a lot of thumb wiggling.

Gaming is catching on at libraries all around the country; in the two years since our first VOYA article on video game tournaments appeared in February 2005, a lot has changed. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) has a Gaming Interest group, VOYA has a regular column on video games, and this summer, ALA Techsource will host the second Games, Learning, and Libraries Symposium. You know that something's gone legit when it gets its own conference.

At Ann Arbor, we've just wrapped up our third full July–December Championship season, which featured **Mario Kart Double Dash** and **Super Smash Bros. Melee** for Nintendo GameCube. After our annual February combination open-play and planning meeting with our most enthusiastic players, we've made some adjustments for the 2007 season (note to self: schedule

around band camp whenever possible) as we roll through our less intense off-season tournament schedule.

We've settled into a groove that is essentially one three-day tournament weekend per month, plus some extra events here and there. We set up the equipment on a Friday afternoon and then have a thirteen-plus or All Ages tournament on Friday Night, a full-day tournament on Saturday for grades six–twelve, and a family-oriented elementary or All Ages tournament on Sunday afternoons. We position these weekends at the beginning of school breaks, so we can leave the equipment up into the week and have more events when students are out of school.

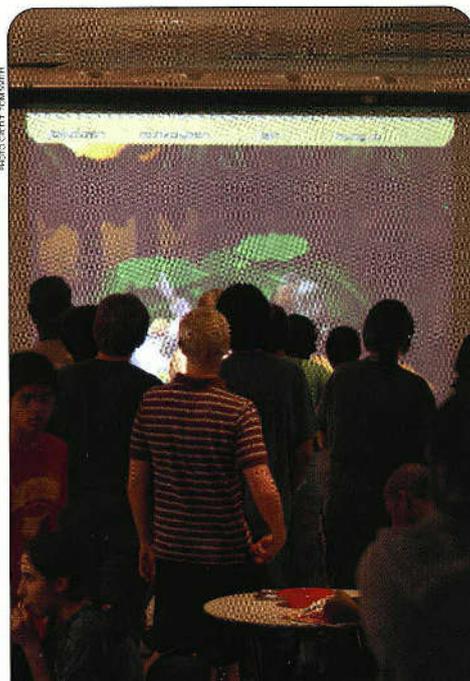
In addition to our **Super Smash/Double Dash** Championship Season, we have also held tournaments featuring **Dance Dance Revolution**, **Super Monkey Ball**, **Guitar Hero**, **Madden Football**, and the Retro Octathalon, an all-ages high-score contest featuring eight vintage (that's pre-1990, folks) video games going all the way back to the original **Pong**.

Tournaments planned for next season include **Pikmin 2**, **WiiSports**, an octathalon-style tournament for rhythm games, and other new additions. Despite the recent release of the next generation of gaming systems, our players agree that the GameCube and its venerable software library has one more season left in it.

### EXPANDING OUR AUDIENCE (IN ALL DIRECTIONS)

When Ann Arbor District Library Game Tournaments (AADL-GT) began, we focused on teens because they have the highest

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percentage of gamers in their population and they're the group most difficult to reach with other services (especially the boys). Although the teens continue to be our most hardcore audience, we have successfully expanded our events to reach all ages. Our tournament weekend model makes it easier to have something for everyone: With three different events to plan, we can maximize the appeal of our weekend tournament offerings and even mix age groups that rarely come together at library events.

For example, our Friday night events are often for ages thirteen-plus, letting teens match up against formidable college-age (or older) adults, who usually take a little wind out of their sails. High schoolers might have considerable time to play video games and improve their skills, but that can't compare to the time that a college student might choose to devote to favorite games. When the college guys face off against our top high school players, there is much pwnage (which 1,690,000 Google hits will confirm is not a typo).

In addition to the thirteen-plus events, we've found that all-ages tournaments have the capability to attract children, teens, twenty-somethings, and adults all at the same time, creating a friendly, collegial atmosphere that really increases the social value of the event. We started the all-ages model with **Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)** events, which have turned into wonderful opportunities to see families playing together—children and parents, sibling teams with internal rivalries, and even the adventurous grandparent now and then. The result is a more relaxed environment, allowing people who haven't played to give it a try without feeling like losers, while simultaneously offering a high level of competition to the very best players in the room. Typically we give out small schwag prizes to the top eight players on the easy **DDR** modes, while the best expert players advance to single-elimination finals to win giftcard prizes. We've recently added small prizes for the best child-adult team to encourage more children to goad their parents into trying it with them.

Although the younger children would love to join with the teens to play in the big tournaments, that's not the environment that our Teen Champion Series intends to produce. To better meet the interests of the younger, upper-elementary players, we've started holding **Pokémon** tournaments, which have turned out to be our fastest-growing success. We offered our first **Pokémon** tournaments during the summer of 2006 to coincide with the tenth anniversary of **Pokémon**. Our first series was called **Pokémondays**, with four weekly tournaments at different branches.

**Pokémon** tournaments are simple to set up, although they can require a lot of Poké-knowledge (google "bulbapedia"). Players bring their Nintendo GameBoy Advance and a copy



▲ AFTER PLAYERS CHECK IN—OFTEN AN HOUR BEFORE THE EVENT—THEY PLAY OPEN MATCHES TO WARM UP WHILE WAITING FOR THE TOURNAMENT TO BEGIN.

put their **Pokémon** possessions, skills, knowledge, and tactics to the test. These events have the competitive feel of the teen tournaments, and it's clear that we're home-growing our future teen tournament fanatics.

We offer different events for **Pokémon** at different levels to allow players with varying amounts of experience to participate. Parents may bring (or check out) a book to read, but socializing with other parents or getting caught up in the gripping excitement of some of the matches (when it's not a Rayquaza and a Groudon vs. a Rayquaza and a Kyogre AGAIN) often prevents them from getting any reading done.

#### ASSETS—NOT JUST SOCIAL BUT CRUCIAL

Around the same time that the idea for AADL-GT came to fruition, we had the opportunity to attend a Search Institute (SI) conference in St. Paul, Minnesota. Just in case there are **VOYA** readers who aren't familiar with the Search Institute, it's "an independent nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities." At the heart of the institute's work is their framework of "40 Developmental Assets," which are positive experiences and personal qualities that young people need to grow up to be healthy, caring, and responsible. Although the goal in attending the conference had nothing to do with our potential video game events, three years later the reality is that our gaming events have become an ideal library model for gently offering the Search Institute's developmental assets to teens. What started as a fun and cutting-edge way to attract new teens (particularly boys) to the library has revealed itself to be a crucial and important part of teens' lives.

As anyone who works with teens in libraries knows, teen input is not only key to providing the services that they want, but also the surest way to inspire their passion and investment. By keeping teens involved in every aspect of event planning and implementation, we've found that

our events can offer 17 of the 40 developmental assets. For example, simply by meeting them on their own level, respecting and validating their interests, and using humor and our vast knowledge of video games, we have managed to meet several external assets, represented here in bold type. The inviting and relaxed atmosphere at our events fulfills the **caring neighborhood** asset. From our open-play planning

▼ LARGE CROWDS PROVIDE EACH OF THE EIGHT SIMULTANEOUS MATCHES WITH ITS OWN AUDIENCE, RAISING THE STAKES AND EXCITEMENT FOR THE PLAYERS.



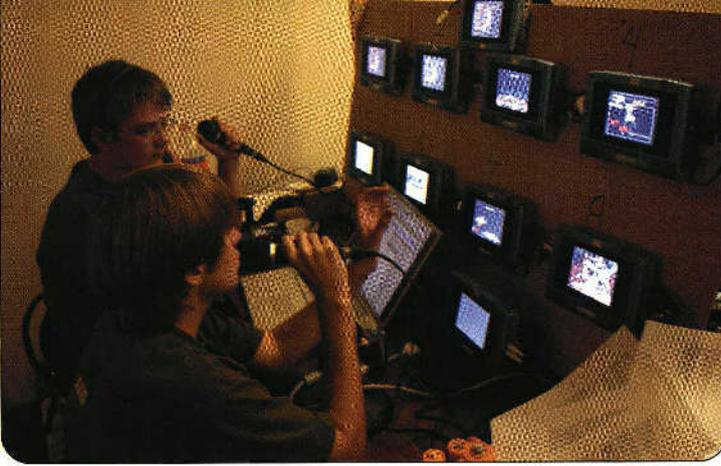
meetings to the teens who do color commentary during tournaments, we meet the **community values youth and youth as resources** assets.

Because our tournaments must be organized and fairly run, they also deliver several assets in the **boundaries and expectations** category by providing the **neighborhood boundaries** of the tournament rules, the **adult role models** that they see in library staff, and the **positive peer influence** as the tournament format encourages pressure to play fair and sportingly. **High expectations** appear in the behavior that we expect from our players as well as their knowledge that their ideas will be considered if they present them cogently. (For example, “this sucks” does not make for a good agenda item.) The simple existence of our gaming events offers a way to make a **constructive use of time** out of their favorite pastime, and also allows parents who attend tournaments a way to feel more familiar—and therefore comfortable—with their teenager’s alien-seeming leisure pursuits.

Our tournaments also provide many of the Search Institute’s internal assets. By getting teens into the library and exposing them to library staff on a personal level, we have made many positive connections that have led to more engagement in the library and its resources. An increase in the **reading for pleasure** asset is met simply by displaying a wide variety of magazines during our events—teens flip through them while waiting for their next turn. Our staff models integrity, honesty, and equality in the organized and fair tournament structure—and then teens model it for each other. We’re often asked if we have problems with fights or other issues. We never have. The game and the love of the game is a common bond; the teens model the **positive values** assets time and again despite their occasional efforts to the contrary. Keeping teens involved in the planning of the events is a key way to meet several of the **social competencies** assets. Our teens feel as if they have control and input into the events and also feel a sense of fair play.

Ultimately these experiences lead to the **positive identity** assets: **personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose**, and a **positive view of personal future**. For young people who don’t excel in athletics, that kind of self-esteem can be hard to come by in our culture. Especially among our younger audiences, we’ve seen that a tiny taste of success (even in the form of a ten-year-old library-branded highlighter given as a consolation prize) can make immediate and positive changes in a player’s attitude and confidence. We get to watch them come a little further out of their shells at each event.

We have witnessed friendships, love, and bonding across so many rarely-crossed lines at our



▲ **“MAJOR” TOM COVENEY (LEFT) AND DANIEL “LEINAD” BURGNER (RIGHT) AGED OUT OF THE TEEN CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES WHEN THEY GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL AFTER THE 2005 SEASON. NOW COLLEGE STUDENTS, THEY PROVIDE EXPERT PLAY-BY-PLAY AND COLOR COMMENTARY FROM THE CONTROL ROOM.**

tournaments—matches that might include an element of cultural, economic, or racial tension are always ended with a handshake and mutual respect. And we might be likely to see careers in video game broadcast journalism unfold for at least a couple of our star commentators. An AADL-GT wedding or two might not be far off, either!

## WHAT NOW?

We have established a solid and growing audience and attracted many new users into the building. One of our favorite players described tournaments as “a gateway drug for libraries” because they have led him to discover other programs, collections, and services that he wouldn’t otherwise have known about. That said, we’ve come to look at these events as much more

than just bait to be switched and replaced with a dusty copy of *The Remembrance of Things Past* when they’re not looking. These gaming events have become a core service at our library—a way to reach an audience that previously could not have cared less about the organization, making them into passionate library fans. Gaming elements are starting to spill over into other programs and services; we’re trying a competitive Lego robotics league this summer. We also have discussed adding a leaderboard for our most frequent gaming contributors to our regular, non-gaming Web site. Embracing the recreational components of our mission and meeting our audiences where they are has paid out big dividends already.

And we’re just getting started. ■

*Erin V. Helmrich is a Teen Services Librarian at the Ann Arbor District Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a member of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Board of Directors, a YALSA Serving the Underserved (SUS) trainer, and a member of the Michigan Library Association Teen Services Division Board. For seven years, she has authored VOYA’s Teen Pop Culture Quizzes. She’s waiting to see if her brain will explode one day from the mass amounts of useless information stored inside.*

*Eli Neiburger is Technology Manager at the Ann Arbor District Library. He owns nine video game consoles (although they’re not all hooked up) and was too young to remember the first time he played a video game. He recently took his four-year-old son camping for the first time in the parking lot of Toys-R-Us, to be first in line for the Nintendo Wii on Launch Day. His book, *Gamers in the LIBRARY? The Why, What, and How of Videogame Tournaments for All Ages*, is forthcoming this summer from ALA Editions.*

AS OUR TOURNAMENTS GREW, WE RELOCATED MUCH OF THE PRODUCTION EQUIPMENT OUTSIDE THE ROOM TO SAVE SPACE. VETERAN COLLEGE-STUDENT COMMENTATORS “MAJOR” (TOP LEFT) AND “LEINAD” CAN COVER THE ACTION ON ALL EIGHT STATIONS WHILE AADL MEDIA PRODUCER DIEGO ASCANI (LEFT) AND PRODUCTION ASSISTANT AL SJOERSMA (BOTTOM RIGHT) RUN THE VIDEO TOASTER THAT PRODUCES THE LIVE VIDEO BROADCAST. ▼





## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Video Games as a Service: Three Years Later  
SOURCE: Voice Youth Advocates 30 no2 Je 2007

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