Building blocks to better libraries: Community building within a public library Minecraft gaming day.

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Abstract

Minecraft is a popular building block game ubiquitous in the cultural landscape of young people. Noticing a gap in traditional library programs for virtual games such as Minecraft, Children and Youth Services Librarians (CYL) at North Melbourne Library developed a collaborative Minecraft Gaming Day between librarians and young library patrons. Challenging the traditional programming approach of designing *for* young people and creating a program *with* young people, the program drew on the knowledge and enthusiasm of the young North Melbourne community. The program aimed to explore a new way of engaging young people and highlighted the positive impact that young people and games can have in an environment in which they are active participants. The gaming program allowed young people to have a role in library programming, treated them as valued community members and gave them the ability to contribute their vision to the future of library services.

"We live today not in the digital, not in the physical,
but in a kind of minestrone that our mind makes of the two."
Paola Antonelli, 2013

Games are central to the cultural landscape of young people and public libraries are creating inventive programming as a way to attract this digitally literate generation. The arrival of virtual gaming worlds as educational and social devices is changing the profile of what public libraries can offer. Libraries are now not only keepers of knowledge and providers of information, they are also meeting spaces, gaming centres, technology access points and digital literacy agents.

North Melbourne Public Library, a branch of the Melbourne Library Service, is a vibrant meeting space for young people. Surrounded by schools, the library is a third place where young people gather to play games, in particular Minecraft. Prized by young people, Minecraft is game in which players build virtual worlds out of blocks. Minecraft challenges players to create their own environment; it has no specific goals for the player to accomplish, allowing a large amount of freedom in design and accomplishment. As of late 2013 it had sold over 33 million copies worldwide, on PC, Xbox and mobile (The Guardian, 2013). Minecraft is a game based inherently on imagination. Unlike other games it encourages collaboration and creativity, not competition.

Seeing a gap in traditional library programs for virtual games such as Minecraft, Children and Youth Services Librarians (CYL) at North Melbourne Library developed a collaborative Minecraft Gaming Day between librarians and young library patrons. Challenging the traditional programming approach of designing *for* young people and creating a program *with* young people, the program drew on the knowledge and enthusiasm of the young North Melbourne community. The program aimed to explore a new way of engaging young people and highlighting the positive impact that young people and games can have in an environment in which they are active participants. The gaming program allowed young people to have a role in library programming, treated them as valued community members and gave them the ability to contribute their vision for the future of library services. This engagement provided the opportunity to combine gaming programs with more traditional library goals such as reader and collection development, literacy learning and social inclusivity.

North Melbourne Library

This research was undertaken in partnership with the North Melbourne Library, under the governance of the Melbourne Library Service, City of Melbourne. North Melbourne Library has a diverse resident population including a high percentage of families and school-aged children (City of Melbourne, 2003). Young people are dynamic part of the library user group and meeting their needs, particularly in relation to new digital technologies is crucial in measuring the success of the CYL activities. The young patrons of North Melbourne Library have historically had a great impact on the library environment due to their social behaviour, noise levels and use of new technologies. Consequently interaction and engagement with young people is a key role for CYL at North Melbourne Library.

The Magic of Minecraft

At its core Minecraft is about using virtual building blocks to create virtual worlds. The game can be played on multiple platforms and puts players in a randomly-generated world where they can create their own structures out of textured cubes - a contemporary virtual version of Lego. It is a unique game as its focus is on discovery, not accomplishment, in the way that traditional games based on points and levels function: for example Donkey Kong and Super Mario Brothers, do not. There are three basic play-modes to Minecraft: single player creative, multiplayer creative and single player survival. The study will focus on the creative versions, as these are the most commonly used within the library network. Through discussion with young people, Minecraft is the perfect platform to understand young people's perceptions and thoughts about space and buildings.

Event Objectives

The Minecraft Games Day was designed to not only give young people a chance to play Minecraft but it also allowed them to imagine and critically examine the library space they were in. If young people could design a library what would it look like? How would it be different to their current library? This virtual library space allowed communication, collaboration and social interaction to occur in a combination of both physical and digital mediums (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2009). Libraries within Minecraft as one young person stated had 'endless possibilities'. 'I like it because it has endless possibilities, it puts you in the world and you can do anything you want' (Case Study Participant, 2013). North Melbourne CYL also wanted to explore the potential of virtual gaming programs to offer an access point to young people's literacy, interests and attitudes towards libraries.

Planning the Minecraft Gaming Day

Melbourne Library Service provides activities for young people but no structured gaming programs. CYL found a gap in programming for both virtual gaming and a program developed and designed by young

people. To address this a cohort of six regular young library patrons and Minecraft enthusiasts of mixed gender and age were asked to be a part of a development and design team for a Minecraft gaming day.

On a weekly basis this cohort engaged with the CYL, sharing information about gaming platforms, virtual worlds, Minecraft and social interests. This knowledge base became a central part of the planning, implementation and success of the Minecraft games day.

The gaming day was structured using Minecraft as a virtual planning tool. Participants were asked to create their own virtual library within the game with no restrictions on the design, idea or library space they could create. They were given a brief to create a library with some essential elements including books; performance spaces and a loans desk to ensure core library features were included.

Fig 1 Invitation to the Minecraft Games Day

Minecraft Gaming Day

A large part of the success of the Minecraft Gaming Day was the management of the facilities and technology. The marketing specified to bring your own laptop – but many participants did not have one. This required the library service to provide up to 20 terminals for access. Minecraft can be played offline once loaded onto a computer and this let most players play in an offline capacity. Those that played online via the libraries wireless network found it difficult due to the wireless connection often dropping out. As remarked by one player, 'We had a bit of a fail day because the technology, the Wi-Fi was a bit dropping out' (Case Study Participant, 2013). There were quite a few instances of young people losing their creations due to computers shutting down or just not performing, often because the extra computers that were used were out-dated technology for gaming use. Young people with their own laptops were far better off in this program as they could control and understand the technology. However the technology failure was not a deterrent to the young participants as they all were supportive of each other, playing in groups and sharing technological advice with one another.

The Minecraft gaming day was successful in connecting and engaging young people, but was limited by a number of technological barriers. A central point to be made is that to combat the inadequacies of the library technology, the young participants themselves provided computers, Internet connections, mobile

phones and gaming paraphernalia that was up-to-date and sufficient for the task. Melbourne Library Service awarded prizes on the day for creative, technical skill and also for encouragement.

DISCUSSION

As outlined in the Melbourne Library Service strategic policy, 'Libraries are not only physical facilities and places to borrow material. They are community hubs and places where people can meet for recreation, information and to foster a love of life-long learning' (Melbourne Library Service, 2006). The Minecraft Games Day achieved traditional library goals as well as many other objectives such as social inclusion, community engagement and literacy building.

Demystifying Gaming Worlds

North Melbourne Library was full of young people on the Minecraft Games Day. The lively space allowed librarians to integrate with young people and to use the opportunity for traditional library capacity building measures such as information sharing, social support and to encourage learning. A librarian encapsulates this interaction, 'It (the gaming day) was great for the kids team in building a connection with some of the junior members of the library. Personally I got to know a few more of the kids using their interest in the Minecraft day as a great kicking off point. We talked about the event, sure, but it gave me the chance to enquire about what they were reading, watching, doing' (library staff member, 2013). We can see that the introduction of virtual worlds and gaming into library programming does not negate the need for interactions between people. Virtual worlds in libraries are in fact a part of the conversation, not a substitute for it. Another important outcome from the gaming day was the learning acquired by parents of the attendees the gaming day. Minecraft helped parents to not only understand the online behaviour of young people but also involved them in the process. Many young people were excited to show their parents their designs and achievements throughout the day. Parents, like librarians, became a part of the learning and social fabric of the day.

Social Inclusion

North Melbourne Library became a conduit for gaming technologies for young people who did not have access to Minecraft or gaming at home. There was a sense of isolation that although they wanted to, some were not able to understand or participate in peer group conversations and discussions about Minecraft unless they were at the library. This is not uncommon as in 2010 a national study found that libraries provided a 'technological lifeline' to young people from low socio economic families; further to this among young adults (14 to 24 years of age) in households below the federal poverty line, 61% used public library computers and the Internet for educational purposes. These statistics suggest that young people continue to turn to libraries for access to technical resources and opportunities (Tripp 2011, p. 230). Social inclusion is an important part of the role that public libraries play in providing access to games and other cultural touch points for their generation. The library becomes a space outside school and home to

integrate and participate with peer groups through the use of new technologies. Libraries, such as North Melbourne during the games day, provide not only social support and a space for young people to interact with each other but also a levelling of class, ethnicity and social hierarchies. This gaming program was a response to young people's interest in Minecraft and in turn gave disadvantaged young people access to a social gaming platform that allowed them to feel socially included. The gaming day created opportunities for interaction not just between librarians and young people, it also fostered a relationship between North Melbourne Library and the local community. Many patrons visiting the library remarked on, and were interested in, the program in the library. It broadened their understanding of young people and broke down assumptions they may have had about young people in the library. Many adult borrowers on the day began discussing their own gaming interests and how these could inform future library programs.

The Engaged Librarian

Apparent in the virtual Minecraft libraries created for the gaming day was the presence of a librarian. In one virtual library titled the 'Big Book', the librarian was a futuristic robot who moved within the space, and spoke its own language. In the 'Treehouse' there was a librarian on every floor to engage with library visitors. It can be seen that there is a place in both virtual and real world libraries for librarians. As one case study participant commented, 'It makes such a big difference if the librarian understands what we are doing – this library is cool because it's not getting shushed all the time. Some libraries are all stiff – but this one is relaxed and you can hang out' (Case Study Participant, 2013). By creating the opportunity for dialogue with young people and allowing their interests to be expressed, the librarian was invited into the virtual and real life spaces that the young people occupied. It is clear that through building a dialogue of trust with young people, and allowing them a key role in program building, there is a sense of ownership over the space and a feeling of relevancy to library programs.

Young people are community builders

During the gaming day many of the young people were involved and keen to help out less experienced players, including those who had previously not had access to the required technology. Dialogue between players within the game and then in person, across the room and over the tops of their screens, was a central part of the Minecraft event, showcasing the variety of communication methods young people employ to engage with their peers and extended communities. This is outlined in a librarian's assessment, 'I remember finding them to be strangely uncompetitive, weirdly supportive of each other' (library staff member, 2013) and 'having forty or so kids running around, wildly inspired by not only their own, but each other's creations' (library staff member, 2013).

Based on participants' comments, we know that young people were active agents in the community space within the library; committed to the building of interest, community awareness and relevance of Minecraft

as a library gaming program. This demonstrates young people's ability to be instrumental in the creation of library communities. Barry Percy-Smith explains, 'we need to pay more attention to opportunities for children and young people to participate more fully in everyday community settings – home, school, neighbourhood – through the actions, choices, relationships and contributions they make'(Percy-Smith 2010, p.109).

Let's do it again…

'I had to think about what people were doing in the library and then think about Minecraft that way. I used to think that the only thing libraries were for is checking in and checking out books but it's not. It's for hanging out and games' (Case Study Participant, 2013). The Minecraft gaming day changed perspectives and challenged traditional perceptions of libraries. Young people and many of their parents were surprised and happy to have a contemporary and relevant gaming program for young people at the library and they remarked,

'We come into the library to play games so it would be so much better if they were in the program as well' (Case Study Participant, 2013).

The relationship built between the young people in the community and the library staff is ongoing and integral to the building of relevant programs for young people. This gaming program has developed a model for further Minecraft activities in the library service. Understanding the technology needed, the logistics and the community interest in this game has provided a solid foundation for future gaming days at the Melbourne Library Service.

CONCLUSION

Next Steps

'I'm still getting asked when the next Minecraft day will be and that's months later. Winner!' (library staff member, 2013).

This quote from a librarian is a measure of the success of the North Melbourne Library Minecraft Gaming Day. North Melbourne Library successfully engaged young people and crossed new boundaries in both virtual and real spaces. The library space was enlivened with young people, sharing ideas and creating libraries on screen. From this we can see how Minecraft is a valid platform for community building, social inclusion and change. Library gaming programs allow important community building activities such as civic participation as well as the development of important library goals such as reader development and digital literacy skills.

One of the key outcomes of the Minecraft Gaming Day was the shared identity built between the team of young people and the Children's and Youth Librarians. Having an ongoing dialogue with young people and observing their interest in the programming process was an encouraging and invaluable learning experience for library staff. It shows that if given support and opportunity, young people themselves can provide community-building outcomes that are both inclusive and relevant.

Further to this it can be seen that to successfully engage in virtual and real worlds with young people we as library staff may not need to provide all of the required technology; we may just need to be aware of it, support it and understand it.

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