

VIDEO GAMES AS A SERVICE

HOSTING TOURNAMENTS AT YOUR LIBRARY

ERIN HELMRICH AND ELI NEIBURGER | (NO MARC RECORDS REQUIRED)

Disclaimer: *Eli is a Computer Geek and Erin is a Media Junkie. Jargon found below may reflect these contexts. We include a glossary for your convenience; glossary terms appear in bold italics within the text and are defined in a sidebar on page 453.*

Libraries are in the content delivery business, *capiscø*? It's that simple, or it used to be. The challenge is that our customers' conceptions of what constitutes both content and delivery are changing fast, especially among those who are substantially younger than the McDLT.

If teenagers come to the public library, they will find content that appeals to them, especially when they have access to good collections of popular music, movies, magazines, and manga. Note the "if." Libraries realize that we need to take steps to get this generation in the door before they become jaded **blog**-reading, **Netflix**-subscribing, **Google-fu** masters who can't imagine why someone would bother actually going to the library.

We need a hook, or as they call it in the private sector, a loss leader. Many public library teen collections have music, movies, and manga, but there is another multibillion-dollar global content industry whose only representative at most libraries is some schmoe bunny with a phonics fetish. Libraries must figure out how to offer gaming-related content and programs for teens. Maybe you're thinking, "But my Director/Board/Boss won't stand by as this new content transforms sweet, innocent children into bloodthirsty hellions." Well, they were saying the same thing about daguerreotypes.

Gaming is an \$11 billion content business and a fundamental component of the teenage media appetite. Of all teenage boys, 95 percent play video games, and 40 percent of online gaming is done by females. Although a few widely popular, undeniably violent titles produce a lot of squawking, 54 percent of games sold last year were rated "E" for everyone; just 12 percent were rated "M" for mature. Games are not just an emerging format; they are here to stay. By now, libraries should have learned not to ignore new formats.

A video game collection would be an appropriate way to expand our cherished delivery model. Here at Ann Arbor District Library (AADL) in

Michigan, however, we wanted to do something that would build community, show our relevance to young people at a tough age, and allow us not only to get content into users' hands, but also to benefit from the social energy that surrounds the consumption of that content.

Instead of a collection, a service. An event. Better, a series of events. Even better, a new **sub-brand** that could encompass ongoing events, burgeoning communities, and possible future collections: Ann Arbor District Library Game Tournaments, or AADL-GT.



Planning: Thinking Big

For our first AADL-GT season, we decided to hold a series of five monthly video game tournaments for grades six to twelve at the library. The first season would focus on a single game to keep it logistically manageable and to give newer players plenty of opportunity to improve over the course of the season. We chose the game **Mario Kart: Double Dash**, a go-kart driving game for Nintendo GameCube in which players race and battle using turtle shells, bombs, bananas, and so on.

We had several reasons for choosing this game. First, it's an incredibly good game—fun, fast, deep, and very well balanced for multiplayer mayhem. It also has a fairly broad appeal, even to girls, turning off only those players who are in the "I'm too cool to fight with turtle shells and banana peels" demographic. Also, **Mario Kart** is rated E for Everyone; even the most creatively paranoid luddite would be hard-pressed to find moral fault with it. Last, **Mario Kart** features a **LAN** mode in which eight **GameCubes** and up to sixteen players can link up and compete simultaneously in the same race, each with their own full-screen view of the action.

Pulling It Off: The Basics

Such an event can be produced with as few as two stations or as many as eight. Each station includes:

- 1 TV • 1 GameCube • 1 **Nintendo Broadband Adapter**
- 1 Copy of **Mario Kart: Double Dash** • 1 **Memory Card**
- 2 **Controllers** (1 included with the GameCube)

To connect the GameCubes together, you need only an eight-port Ethernet [see **LAN**] hub and regular old Ethernet cables. There's no configuration or other geekery required. Pull together the hardware, plug it in, and you've enhanced the content experience far beyond that which the home user can attain. Anything you add from this point forward just enhances the experience. You could provide the equipment and let the attendees self-organize matches and tournaments.



“Geek Central” is the tournament’s nerve center, where the video stream is assembled and scores are tabulated. Visible are IT Manager Eli Neiburger (with microphone), A/V Specialist Diego Ascani (behind the Video Toaster), Network Administrator John Blyberg (on counter), and Systems Planner Kip DeGraaf (seated).

If you want to organize and run a real tournament for your players, things will be a little more complex. We planned each tournament as a four-hour event with different competitions to keep things interesting. Our tournaments contain four events:

1. Single-player race tournament
2. Single-player battle tournament
3. Co-op team race tournament
4. Prize round

The first three events include qualification and elimination rounds so that every player of any skill level is guaranteed a certain number of matches before being eliminated. Competitors can register for any or all of the first three events, so even if they are knocked out, they know they'll be playing again soon.

The top four winners of each of the first three events advance to the prize round, where they go through qualification and elimination rounds until the first, second, and third-place prize winners are declared. Our Friends of the Library donated a generous prize budget which allowed for \$70, \$50, and \$30 prizes for the winners of each monthly tournament prize round, given as gift certificates to local video game shops.

Our final event in December was a tournament of champions, including the winners of each event throughout the season and a wildcard tournament to give walk-ins a shot at the championship rounds. The first prize for the championship was an *iPod*, the second prize a brand new and hard-to-get *Nintendo DS*, and the third prize a *Nintendo GBA-SP*, thanks again to the Friends of the Library.

Sounds great, right? Easier said than done. You don't have enough money, any technical staff—or even a programming budget. Get creative! Take our blueprint, make a plan, and get the needed resources donated. A few ideas:

1. Recruit teens to bring in their consoles, TVs, or copies of the game.
2. Pursue sponsorships and donations. Corporations, local businesses, or individuals are looking for ways to meet their charitable tax deductions. The opportunity to fund a new service that reaches an underserved demographic is an appealing sell.
3. Scout out some local gamers and techies (try comic book shops or shanghai teenage children of staff members) to volunteer and help pull it off. Enthusiasm for gaming is easily spread.
4. Partner with your community center, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club,

or other organization or agency. A little bit of funding and staff from each, combined, goes a long way. Once the tournaments are running smoothly, you can take them on the road in support of your partner's events.

Our library was able to purchase all the equipment needed. The eight bare bones stations described above can be had for around \$3,000, including TVs (we got our 20-inch Samsungs at Sam's Club for \$160 each), GameCubes, and copies of the game. The key is to see it as investment in a new ongoing service, not a one-time cost for a single event.

As to staffing, our library was in a good position. Erin and her youth department colleagues handled promotion, scheduling, registration, scoring, prizes, and food. Eli and his staff handled purchasing, setup, software development, check-in, and video production. Libraries without their own in-house squad of Nintendo Geeks can just as easily recruit teens (or hip parents) to help pull the event off.

What really brought this project to fruition were creativity, passion, know-how, talent, and the desire to offer something new, cutting-edge, and fun.

Going the Extra Mile: Knocking 'Em Dead

When faced with a project as fun as this tournament series, we geeks at AADL could not possibly leave well enough alone and produce a simple, straightforward event. One of the risks that any library takes when expanding services into new territory is that it's only new territory to us. Our customers—and our competitors—know this territory well. If libraries, already tainted with that whiff of the fuddy-duddy, dip a tentative toe into waters swimming with multimillion-dollar enterprises, only to emerge looking amateurish by comparison, the teen response could easily mutate from “Wow, the library's having a **Mario Kart** Tournament” into “The library can make even **Mario Kart** seem boring.” At least that's the rationale we used to justify making this already cool event even cooler.

We pulled together existing resources, did a little software development, and delivered the following suite of enhancements to the basic idea, taking it to the next level. It's important to send a message to our soon-to-be-jaded *TiVo*-watching *iTunes* junkies, telling them that we get it.



Two players decide who will drive and who will shoot as they prepare for the Co-op race event.

Tournament Enhancements

1. Project a feed from one of the GameCubes onto a big screen.

This task can be as simple as splitting one of the video outputs and running it to a projector. That's too simple for us. We sought out early-model GameCubes that still had a digital A/V out port, and got component cables to hook the GameCubes up to the TV. We then took the *S-Video* out from each GameCube and ran them all back to our NewTek *Video Toaster*, a digital video production system that

we already had. Then we were then able to cut back and forth between the eight GameCubes to show the best view of the action on the big screen. It could be done just as easily with an inexpensive eight-way selector and an LCD projector, but our Toaster allowed us to put in effects, overlays, output from tournament management applications, live video, and other variations on the theme. Using our existing video infrastructure also enabled us to broadcast the Grand Championships live on cable access television, increasing both the appeal and the reach of the event.

2. “Emcee” the event with live play-by-play.

It just so happened that our Technology Manager, Eli, is a huge **Mario Kart** fan—a fortunate coincidence. He took the microphone for the room’s P.A. system and acted as a play-calling Master of Ceremonies with added color commentary: announcing who was in first place during the races (which changes every few seconds), who had what weapons, who was leading the standings, what turns to watch out for, when the pizza would arrive, and other information of vital importance to the racers. Easy to pull off technically, calling the plays adds a real wow factor to the event, helping the players feel that they’re a part of something cool and exciting. It also provides a great opportunity to promote other teen-oriented library events between races and to get to know the players by repeatedly calling out their names as they fight for victory. If no one on your staff is up to the task, it’s a perfect opportunity to get teen attendees involved with tournament production.

3. Use software to manage the tournament and display instant results.

Several aspects of administering a tournament can be fairly complex. Attendees must be registered and checked in for events, brackets must be built, results collected, scores tabulated, victors advanced to the next round, and so on. These are daunting tasks with paper and pencil, so we developed some custom tournament management software. Numerous open-source tournament management tools are available (search for “tournament” on <http://sourceforge.net> or use our tools at <http://axis.aadl.org/aadl-gt/engine-gt.html>). Our system handles registration, check-in, bracket population, scoring (we use two **wireless tablets** to collect the scores), **leaderboard** display, and it also shows the players who is up next and on which station they will be playing. Our software allows us to overlay the player’s name and recent race statistics on the video feed. This software helps make the tournament professional and slick, an impact not lost on the attendees. Several teens have asked us if the tournament software is made by Nintendo.

4. Use a blog to promote the event and build a community.

To promote AADL-GT and other teen events, we set up a blog at <http://axis.aadl.org>, capitalizing on the AXIS teen newsletter **brand** that we had begun building. To better market our teen services to their intended audience, we created the AXIS brand to dissociate our teen events from storytimes and book reports in teens’ minds. It

allowed us to replace “Ann Arbor District Library Young Adult Services” with four short letters that are easier to remember and promote. In addition to our newsletter, calendar, and blog, AXIS appears on all teen-oriented marketing materials, and axis@aadl.org is the master e-mail address for teen inquiries. We made posts on the AXIS blog to announce upcoming tournaments, registration details, and tournament results. During the tournaments, we brought the blog up on the screen, encouraged the attendees to visit it, and showed them how to leave comments. The community quickly grew, complete with pre-race **trash-talking**, suggestions for future events, and inquiries about left-behind jackets. Promoting events interactively online is cheap, easy, and gives the teens a focus for their excitement in the long weeks leading up to the event. We used **blosxom** (<http://www.blosxom.org>) as our blogging engine, but a free service such as **Blogger** (<http://www.blogger.com>) would work just fine.

Promotion: Reaching Critical Mass

One of the primary goals of this service is to bring new users into the library. Libraries rarely have problems marketing to their core groups of users who know where to look. Yet reaching new users can be tricky, especially if we think within our normal boxes of newspaper ads and event listings.

Teen events are promoted most effectively through word-of-mouth. The promotional challenge is seeding the word throughout the community so that the buzz can reach critical mass quickly. When we were in the early stages of planning, our Teen Services staff was making rounds through the middle schools. It was a great opportunity to get the word out about the upcoming tournament series and get the teens excited about all our services. The typical reaction to the announcement of library **Mario Kart** Tournaments was a chorus of thuds as jaws dropped onto desks. We also devoted the back page of our spring teen newsletter to promoting the tournament series.

As the first tournament drew closer, we wanted a way to get the word out a little more unconventionally, associating our tournaments with other cool things going on in town. We looked into the local telephone pole posting ordinance. Our community allows telephone pole posting as long as

posters promote an event less than two weeks away, and if we remove out-of-date posters when we put ours up. We developed a poster that was reminiscent of a band flyer, printed out a stack, and went a-papering. We also distributed posters to an extensive list of teen-relevant businesses, including comic and anime shops, arcades, and sub shops. Many of these places have community bulletin boards, so getting the posters up was a snap.

As the tournaments got rolling, it was clear that indeed the most effective promotion was being done by the participants, who brought friends to the next tournaments, giving us a steady forty



Showing off their Grand Championship prizes and staff-created crowns at the end of the AADL-GT season are (left to right): second place Nintendo DS winner Ian “Duck” Melcher, third place Gameboy SP winner Derek “D-Rex” Hibbs, and first place iPod winner Stephen “TurtlePerson2” Savage.



percent growth rate over the first three events. Here is where the monthly tournament series idea really paid off; rather than building up for a single event that teens might or might not know about, the series format allowed the audience to grow steadily over the season.

Where to Go from Here: How to Top It

As we were promoting this event, we encountered significant interest from people who were over eighteen or fans of other games. There's plenty of room to expand. For starters, we're now scheduling entire tournament weekends—we set up the equipment once and use it for several events, including tournaments for adults or younger children. We have also scheduled some open play days with no tournament, just making the hardware available for walk-in play.

Ideally it would be great to set up a room with permanent gaming hardware and software, and teach some teens how to use our tournament management system so they can organize and run their own tournaments. Content, meet delivery.

We're discussing retro gaming nights that encourage attendees to bring in their own archaic games and systems to share, and planning is underway for AADL-GT season 2. Several games have been discussed, including other Nintendo games and games for other systems. For instance, when we asked at the last event if there was interest in a **Dance Dance Revolution** tournament, the roar of assent was formidable.

As a great man once said, we've taken our first step into a larger world.

Comments from Teen Gamers

- "It was fun, but losing to my brother just takes all the fun out of it."
- "It's way better than having a readathon or something. [And] it's real cool that the library is giving away iPods for playing video games."
- "I think it's really cool, and it's really generous that the library's contributing to it."
- "I think these tournaments will bring a lot of people to the library. I didn't actually make it to the finals, but I still had quite a lot of fun."
- "I've been pretty much obsessing over this game for ages, and I'm glad that I finally found a way to vent that."

Web Resources

Axis Teen Blog: <http://axis.aadl.org>

Bloxxom Blogging Engine: <http://www.bloxxom.org>

GT-Engine Tournament Software: <http://axis.aadl.org/aadl-gt-engine.html>

NewTek Video Toaster: <http://www.newtek.com/products/vt/index.php>

The Official Mario Kart Web Site: <http://www.mariokart.com>

Open Tournament System: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/tournoy>

Eli Neiburger (eli@aadl.org) is the Technology Manager at the Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan, is a Mario Fanboy, and commands a staff of geeky minions. Erin V. Helmrich (helmriche@aadl.org) is a Teen Services Librarian at the Ann Arbor District Library. An author of VOYA's Teen Pop Culture Quiz since 1999 (see the front page of <http://www.voya.com>), she strives to take the library to the cutting edge. She's lucky enough to work with Eli, who not only gets it, but can deliver it! Both Eli and Erin are tattooed. Eli's tattoo is from a Nintendo game.

Geek Speak: A Glossary

Note: Terms are listed in the order in which they appear in the article.

Blog: Short for Weblog, a blog is essentially a Web site that consists of frequent, usually informal, predominantly inane posts, often with equally inane reader comments.

Netflix: A DVD rental subscription service with an online interface. Blockbuster execs call it "The Evil One."

Google-fu: The art of using **Google** efficiently and effectively. "I wanted to find out more about this awesome Nigerian investment opportunity, but my **Google-fu** has failed me."

Brand: A name or logo used to group together products and aid promotion; or, a glyph burned onto a cow's bottom.

Sub-brand: A brand-within-a-brand, such as Cherry Coke or Pennzoil Salad Dressings.

LAN: Local Area Network, a group of computers directly connected with cables and networking hardware. Sometimes called Ethernet, but not by Hunter S. Thompson.

GameCube: A video game player from Nintendo, released in 2001, that connects to a television and plays games distributed on small optical disks. Has a handle for easy theft.

Nintendo Broadband Adapter: A small module that fits into the bottom of a GameCube and allows games that support it to connect to other GameCubes, or the Internet, if you have the one game that actually does that.

Memory Card: A small, removable cartridge used by the GameCube to store player data, such as scores and rewards received. You can never have enough.

Controllers: The conglomeration of sticks and buttons held in one's hands to play a video game. This controller, it vibrates.

iPod: The most popular handheld digital music player, made by Apple. Officially designated "infernal" by the Recording Industry Association of America.

Nintendo DS: Nintendo's brand new handheld game system, with two screens and wireless networking. Larger than some laptops.

Nintendo GBA-SP: Game Boy Advance SP, Nintendo's smallest version of the Game Boy Advance, with a folding design and a brightly lit screen. Pretend it's a phone and play games during meetings.

TiVo: A Personal Video Recorder (PVR) for home users that can record TV programming to its hard drive for later viewing, or pause and rewind live TV, skipping commercials. Sure to be outlawed soon.

iTunes: Apple's music player software and music store. Users can buy and download songs for \$.99 each, dooming B-sides to permanent obscurity.

S-Video: A type of port and cable for video. Better than the usual composite cables, but not as good as modern component video. I could expound for a while on this topic . . .

Video Toaster: A computer-based video production system that can switch between different video inputs and overlay text in real time. You could put some bread in it, and eventually you would get something like toast.

Wireless Tablet: A handheld computer, wirelessly connected to the Internet and controlled with a stylus. Microsoft used to call them "the future of computing." Now that people have actually used them, they're called a "niche market."

Leaderboard: A list of players and scores, starting with well, the leader.

Trash-talking: Unreserved teasing and insults traded as part of any competitive event that includes boys.