Get Game@ZSR—How We Did It And What We Learned Along The Way

by

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Background

The idea to conduct a pilot gaming event at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library of Wake Forest University was born out of a desire to reach students who were not likely to come to the library before cramming in the last week of final exams. The Library routinely conducted tours during freshman orientation but it was evident that a large number of students were not being reached. First-year men, in particular, were targeted for outreach as they are commonly referred to as the loneliest students on campus. First-year women typically receive a good deal of attention from upperclassmen, but men are less sought out. What better way to appeal to eighteen-year-old males and bring them into the library than to offer them free food and a night of video games?

Wake Forest University is a medium-sized, private university in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with a major liberal arts emphasis and strong professional schools. Freshmen are provided with a ThinkPad laptop and printer as part of their tuition and receive a new model ThinkPad in their junior year that they keep when they graduate. The Z. Smith Reynolds Library is an integral part of the university’s award-winning technology program. Staff members in the Library’s Information Technology Center (ITC) train faculty and students on a wide range of topics including ThinkPad management, the Blackboard course management system, mobile technology, blogging, spam filtering, Endnote, Web design and many other emerging technology issues.

The proposal to host a game night in the Library raised a few eyebrows across campus as well as in the Library itself. Some questioned whether a serious academic support unit like the library should stoop to frivolous entertainment. Yet this sentiment ignored the growing body of evidence that gaming is both big business and can have
serious academic implications. Since 2004, the gaming industry has outpaced the film industry in total sales. Gaming has affected a whole generation of users, as today’s college student has been playing video games practically since birth. Gaming theory is a well-studied field of academic inquiry and is being adopted in many different disciplines – not the least of which includes information literacy and library instruction. In the last several years, a small number of pioneers in public, academic and school libraries have seen the marketing and educational value of the gaming phenomenon and embraced the movement for the sheer fun of it. Their efforts achieved a certain level of recognition when the American Library Association sponsored the first annual Gaming, Learning and Libraries Symposium in July, 2007.

The history of the Wake Forest experience may serve as an example of how an academic library can expand its user base, gain credibility with its least-enthusiastic users, use technology in creative ways, and have a little bit of fun. It is not necessary to have a large budget or invest in expensive, short-lived equipment. It only takes a little imagination.

**Initial Planning**

In the summer of 2005, Lynn Sutton, the director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University, approached the members of the Technology Team with the idea of a video game night sponsored by the Library. As the planning began, it soon became clear that more than Library staff would be needed to pull off the event later known as Get Game@ZSR. In addition to Library staff involvement, these events would also require student participation. The Information Systems department at Wake Forest University employs Resident Technical Advisers (RTAs). RTAs are students who live in
the residence halls and assist students with the effective use of the ThinkPads issued by
the University to all full-time students. The Manager of Technology Training in the
Library contacted the Information Systems (IS) staff member who administered the RTA
program and arranged for the Library and IS to partner on this project. IS also funded the
cost of drinks, candy and paper goods for each event. The lead RTA for the 2005-2006
academic year was an avid gamer who proved himself a valuable resource in planning the
first event of this series.

With three months to plan the first event, the Manager of Technology Training,
the Training Specialist and the lead RTA formed a group and began by finding a name
for the gaming program. Finding a name was a challenge, and it involved the
collaboration of students and Library staff. Ultimately, it was the Library Director who
took the list of suggestions and morphed them into the title “Get Game@ZSR.” Once a
catchy name was established, the group started addressing the logistics of such an event.
There was no real model to follow. Some public libraries were hosting game nights,
supplying the participants with library-owned game consoles and either TV or projectors
for game play, but there were no academic library models that fit the requirements of Get
Game@ZSR. The primary requirement focused on hosting an event without buying
gaming consoles or projectors, while creating an atmosphere that would bring students
out of their residence halls and into the Library with their own gaming equipment. Food,
projectors, and a wide open space for gaming were the keys to drawing participants to the
event!
Early meetings focused on compiling a list of questions that needed to be addressed. Once the list was created, the group began addressing those questions and as answers were identified, the format of the event began to take shape.

**Questions that had to be addressed**

**Where to hold the event?**

Initially, three spaces were considered: a large, all-night study room, the student computer lab and lobby, and the Library atrium. The group chose the ZSR Library’s atrium for its size and dramatic beauty.

**Image 1-The Z. Smith Reynolds Library atrium during a Get Game@ZSR event.**

It is a large, open space, with six floors of windows on either end. It connects the two wings of the Library and provides 16 tables for study. Based on the size of this space, there was room for at least eight game consoles and projectors each with up to four players and plenty of room for spectators and food. The choice of this space, however, limited the potential timing of the event. Because this space is open to the entire Library and because the event was expected to be noisy, if held in the atrium it would have to be held after Library hours.

**When to hold the event?**

The challenge with timing was to find a time that didn’t conflict with other events on campus but that would still be practical for the staff who were working the event. Initially, options such as an overnight event or late evening event were discussed. Everyone agreed that holding the event early in the semester while new students were still looking for things to do was the best option for getting good
attendance at the event. Finally, Friday evenings were selected. The Library
closes at 7pm, so the event could run from 7-11 p.m. without unduly impacting
students or staff. The idea of hosting an overnight event presented a staffing issue,
and other times were tested and found to be less popular with the students.

**How to get game consoles?**

Since this was a pilot event, it didn’t make sense to invest too much
money in game consoles that may or may not be used again. So with no budget to
purchase game consoles, and no resources or budget for renting game consoles in
number, the only solution was to ask students to bring their own. As it turned out,
students did not mind bringing their own game consoles, controllers and games;
some even preferred it!

**Can any game console be supported?**

We had concerns that for our first event we should limit game consoles to
the two primary consoles in the market at the time, the Sony PS2 and the
Microsoft Xbox. We thought this would be necessary to support the event and
ensure projectors could be connected to consoles. In retrospect, this limitation was
not necessary and for future events the game nights were open to any game
console, encouraging students to bring a wide variety of consoles and games.

**How to get projectors?**

We knew we would need at least six LCD projectors to host an event of 24
or more students. This was a huge hurdle. Rental costs were prohibitive and the
Library only had access to one LCD projector. The Library approached
Information Systems and requested that the end-of-life LCD projectors that were
being removed from electronic classrooms across campus each year be used for
this project. IS had tried selling these well-used projectors, but as they were at the
end of their useful life, there was no market for them. The Library had to promise
to handle the disposal of these projectors as they ceased to work and to agree to
take them with no promise of future tech support. This creative solution turned
out to be a win-win for both parties as IS did not have to deal with the disposal of
this equipment and the ZSR Library had projectors for these gaming events and
other events.

How to get screens?

Because the atrium did not have blank wall space for projection, screens
needed to be procured for the event. The Library had one screen as part of our
equipment available for checkout. Additionally, when cleaning out an office in
the old wing of the Library, an old screen was discovered and pressed into
service. For the rest, the Library rented six screens at a cost of $150 from a local
video production company. Once it appeared that this would be a recurring event,
four new screens were purchased from the annual budget. These screens paid for
themselves in saved rental costs after three events. As a result of the success of
the events, and plenty of projectors, more screens were needed over time. The
group learned that makeshift screens can be created from blackout curtain liner
fabric, and a curtain rod, but not from standard bed sheeting.

How to have students register for the event?

Fear (or at least a healthy skepticism) of the unknown dictated that we
require students to register in advance for a seat. There was limited seating
available based on the number of game consoles. The Library needed an idea of how many students were bringing game consoles and needed to match those consoles to other players. However, in marketing the event we made it clear that if students didn’t register in advance, they were still welcome to come and participate as a spectator and enjoy the free pizza, sodas and candy. Students emailed the Manager of Technology Training and were sent a confirmation message that requested information on the game equipment they planned to bring if any. This information was placed on a diagram that paired students with game consoles to ensure everyone registered had a place to game. Registration remains a requirement for guaranteed seating and to ensure a smooth event with adequate numbers of game consoles for gamers.

**How to market the event?**

In addition to flyers, emails to students, and the efforts of the RTAs to talk up the event among users, a YouTube video, a Facebook group, and even an article in the student newspaper were all used in an effort to get students to attend. Marketing the first event was a challenge and has not proved any easier over time. Getting the average college student to commit to an event, register in advance and then attend is not easy. No matter what date is selected, there were always competing events. Known for delaying decision making, the Millennials were true to form. As such, there was always a last-minute flurry of registrations just about the time the group began thinking no one would attend the event.
Each event had its own set of issues to address, and with each event the group running this program became more efficient in the use of resources to prepare and host these events. The specifics of each event and the key elements of each event can be found below. Two different time slots and locations have been used for Get Game@ZSR. The RTAs are listed below as attendees, as they both work the event and participate in the events. They are broken out from the total number of attendees to accurately express student attendance.

The Events:

**Fall 2005**
Event: Xbox and PS2 Video Game Night  
Date: Friday, September 16\textsuperscript{th} 2005  
Time: 7-11PM  
Location: ZSR Library Atrium  
Total Attendees: 48 students, 12 RTAs  
Staff: 7  
Total Cost: $424

The first event of any program is always the most arduous. One prepares for every possibility in an effort to ensure success. In addition to the hours spent planning prior to the event, the day of the event was completely taken over picking up screens from the equipment rental company, buying extra cables, video connectors and power strips, preparing backup equipment such as extra projectors in case they needed to be pressed into service and ordering food. With the help of library staff, the atrium was repurposed in an hour, screens and projectors were in place and students began arriving. As the evening went on, we tripped two circuit breakers and had to run some extension cords, allowed in organizational space for temporary events. Additionally, there was such a run on pizza at the start of the event that we placed another order for the same amount only to
discover the students had already consumed their fill of pizza for the evening. While the
four Xbox consoles networked together to play an enormous game of Halo 2, the two
Sony PlayStations played Madden 2006. These were serious gamers who hunkered down
for the evening and needed little assistance from the Library staff or RTAs. This was a
very successful kick-off to these events with lots of positive feedback from the
participants.

Spring 2006
Event: Xbox Halo2 Tournament
Date: Friday, February 17th 2006
Time: 3-7PM
Location: ZSR All-Night Study Room
Total Attendees: 17 students, 6 RTAs
Staff: 6
Total Cost: $171

By the spring of 2006, screens were purchased, making equipment rental
unnecessary. This saved the Library $150 in rental costs. Halo 2 on the Xbox was
selected as the game for the tournament. The tournament only had room for sixteen
students, making it a much smaller event. Additionally, both a new venue and time were
selected. The all-night study room isolated the noise from the event, making it possible to
hold the event during normal library hours. Based on the survey results from the previous
game night, the 3 p.m.-7 p.m. time slot was equally appealing to students. In reality, the
later time slot, 7-11 p.m., has proven far more popular. The tournament was double-
elimination, with each round lasting for eight minutes or twenty-five “kills,” which ever
came first. This meant the tournament was completed by 6 p.m., making for a short event.
However, students were very pleased with the event. A trophy was given to the winner
and the student’s name was added to a Get Game@ZSR perpetual plaque.

Image 2 – Get Game@ZSR Tournament Winners.
The challenge that came from this event was how to keep tournament players around once they had been eliminated. One solution proposed was to combine an open game night and a tournament, so that gamers could stay once they were eliminated and continue playing, and those not in the tournament could still play games and attend the event. Even in this new venue, circuits were tripped and had to be reset during the tournament. Once again, pizza, sodas and candy fueled the gamers.

**Fall 2006**
Event: Open Video Game Night  
Date: Friday, September 15th 2006  
Time: 7-11PM  
Location: ZSR All-Night Study Room  
Total Attendees: 11 students, 6 RTAs  
Staff: 5  
Total Cost: $167

The Fall 2006 open game night was the least successful event to date, with only eleven students attending the event. The competition of a beautiful September evening coupled with other events held by student organization on campus and community outdoor music events held downtown proved to be a more powerful draw than video games and pizza. However, costs were kept low and were limited to pizza, sodas, candy and paper goods, and the students who did attend enjoyed the event. As the third event in this series, all the equipment required, screens, power strips, hubs, was already available and setup and breakdown of the event was quick and efficient, using as few resources as possible. After two small events in the all-night study room, everyone involved agreed that moving back to the atrium was a good idea, allowing for more space for game play, spectators, and food.
### Spring 2007

Event: Open Video Game Night  
Date: Friday, February 9th 2007  
Time: 7-11PM  
Location: ZSR Library Atrium  
Total Attendees: 39 students, 3 WFU staff, 10 RTAs  
Staff: 5  
Total Cost: $160  

In an effort to avoid the low attendance of the Fall 2006 game night, marketing efforts were intensified for the Spring 2007 Get Game@ZSR. A YouTube video was created and distributed, fliers were heavily distributed, and the RTAs were pressed to market the event among the students. Additionally the student newspaper did an article on the event. A new Nintendo Wii was the centerpiece of the evening and everyone took turns playing Wii Sports, with doubles tennis being the most popular game! Between the Wii, the marketing blitz and some door prizes, this was an exciting event with a diverse group of games ranging from tennis on the Wii to Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) on the PS2. The diversity of video games created a different atmosphere that encouraged students to try a variety of games. The core of these events, our hardcore Xbox Halo 2 gamers had their own space away from the chaos of the Wii and DDR. This segregation of space and game consoles made it much easier to have some children attend the event as well. It was a welcome surprise when a few Wake Forest faculty and staff attended, bringing their children to play Wii Sports and Dance Dance Revolution. There was a distinct party feel to this event, making it unlike any previous event.

### Fall 2007

Event: Open Video Game Night  
Date: Friday, September 21st 2007
Following up on the success of the Spring 2007 event, the model changed little for the Fall 2007 Get Game@ZSR event. Door prizes were dropped based on the lukewarm response they received at the Spring event. Place cards were created so students knew exactly where to set up their equipment, and in an effort to continually update the event, party games like Catch Phrase were added to the event and enjoyed by some of the adults who brought children. Additionally, some remote controlled cars were brought to the event and several of the students enjoyed driving them around the large, open atrium. The party feeling of the previous event was maintained with a variety of games and game consoles, and instead of one Wii, there were three. More WFU staff and their children attended this event and staffing for the event was scaled back to four members of the Library staff with the full cadre of RTAs.

Spring 2008
Event: Open Video Game Night and Tournament with UNCG
Date: Friday, January 25th 2008
Time: 7-11PM
Location: ZSR Library Atrium
Total Attendees: TBD
Staff: TBD
Total Cost: TBD

After a two-year hiatus, due to low turnout from the previous tournament, the game night tournament is back for Spring 2008. By combining it with an open game night it can be a larger event with more participants than a tournament alone, and participants in the open game night can also play in the tournament or be spectators.
Additionally, by teaming up with the Jackson Library at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, students can compete across the two campuses. The game of choice for the tournament is Halo 3 for Xbox 360. The winner of the Get Game@ZSR will receive a trophy and have their name added to the Get Game@ZSR perpetual plaque.

**Lessons Learned**

Over the three years Get Game@ZSR events have been hosted by the ZSR Library, many lessons have been learned. *First, marketing of these events is a difficult and ever-changing proposition.* There are always conflicting events such as home sporting events and pledge night and circumstances beyond one’s control such as weather that can all affect the number of participants. New approaches to marketing the events must be continually implemented.

*Never assume that library staff know what the students want in these events.* Survey the student participants after the events to learn about various times, formats and venues that may also appeal to the students. Be sure to ask some open-ended questions to give students the chance to tell you what their other answers won’t. Web survey tools like Zoomerang and Survey Monkey make surveying participants a snap. We asked questions such as “What day of the week do you prefer for these events?” and “What time of day do you prefer?” We also asked if they minded bringing their own equipment and discovered to our surprise that they liked bringing their own game console, controllers, and games to the events. This was an answer we did not expect! We also learned there was significant demand for a tournament event based on their survey responses.
Work to partner with other groups on and off campus. In addition to the RTAs sponsoring the beverages, candy and paper goods, the off-campus used book seller, Edward McKay Used Books, sponsored the perpetual plaque and individual trophy for the event. Beyond financial support, student employees in the Library help set up the atrium for the event. By finding sponsors both on campus and in the community, more people feel like they are a part of these events and they in turn discuss and market the event themselves.

Conclusion

Before the clean-up from the first event started and the gamers were packing up and leaving the Library, they began asking when we would be hosting the next event! These events become less expensive and require fewer resources as time goes on, making them an efficient Library marketing tool. Also, these events offer the Library staff a chance to meet students and learn more about culture of gaming and even play a few games themselves. Additionally, when marketing these events, many students as well as staff at the University who are initially shocked the Library would support gaming begin to learn more about the Library and realize that new and exciting things are happening at ZSR! Students enjoy these events and they give the Library a chance to show itself as both a place for gathering and a place for learning.