

The shape and state of gaming in UK libraries

Sarah McNicol

Abstract

This article describes the results of a survey to ascertain the current state of gaming provision in UK libraries. The online survey was completed by a self-selecting sample of libraries from mainly public and school libraries. The questions were based on similar surveys carried out by the Library Game Lab at Syracuse in the United States. The results show that, despite little mention of gaming in library policy documents, there is evidence of considerable support for gaming in UK public and school libraries. A number of benefits for libraries and gamers are identified, but there are barriers to greater involvement in gaming such as resources and negative attitudes within the profession.

1 Introduction

Gaming in libraries can be controversial, especially with the current financial constraints libraries are facing. Among UK librarians, there is considerable diversity of opinion regarding the value and place of gaming in libraries. In the United States, however, there is evidence of significant support for gaming. In 2009, for example, the American Library Association (ALA) launched an online toolkit to support libraries in building gaming services (ALA, 2009). There is also a National Gaming Day (ALA, 2010). These initiatives were developed following a series of surveys carried out at the Library Game Lab at Syracuse. Since 2007, the Lab has been collecting data about gaming in US libraries (Nicholson, 2009). These surveys have provided valuable data about the level of support for gaming in libraries and the outcomes derived from gaming activities for libraries from all sectors. To date, however, there is no equivalent data available for UK libraries.

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2 How widespread is gaming in the UK

A survey of gamers in eight European nations carried out on behalf of the Interactive Software Federation of Europe in 2010 gives some useful background data about the current level of interest in gaming in the UK. Throughout all the European countries surveyed, 25.4% of adults had played a video game in the previous six months. The figure for the UK alone was 32% (ISFE, 2010, 16). This survey found that gaming is most popular among the young; in the UK, 62% of 16-29 year olds are gamers, compared to just 17% of over 50s. Interestingly, in the UK at least, the survey found little difference between the percentage of men and women who are gamers (34% and 31% respectively) (ISFE, 2010, 17).

Across Europe, the PC remains the most used games system; it is the main system for 49% of gamers aged 16-49. However, the UK has the lowest figure for PC gaming; here, it is the main system for just 23% of gamers (IFSE, 2010, 25). However, Wii consoles are more popular in the UK than elsewhere in Europe; it is the main system for 27%, compared to just 14% for Europe as a whole. Just over half of European gamers play a handheld gaming device. (ISFE, 2010, 23)

According to the survey, the core motivations for playing games are fun (61%), relaxation (53%) and a positive way to pass time (53%) (ISFE, 2010, 31). Although a lack of time was the most common reason why non-gamers did not play games, 15% of those surveyed in the UK said the main reason they did not play was because games were too expensive. 24% said they would play if the cost of games was lower (ISFE, 2010, 35). More than 40% of UK gamers have below average incomes (ISFE, 2010, 79). Having games available to play in libraries, or borrow at a relatively low cost, could therefore help to make gaming more accessible to all sections of the community.

When asked about other leisure activities, 79% of gamers said they also read books, 85% also read newspapers or magazines, 78% watch DVDs and 87% also listen to music (ISFE, 2010, 44). Gamers are, therefore, likely to be interested in many of the other resources and services available in libraries.

The publicity attracted by violent videogames can distort non-gamers' perceptions of gaming. It was interesting to note that, in the survey, online versions of more traditional games were the most widely played type of online game. Puzzle/Board/Game Show/Trivia/Card games were the most played online games, with 58% of all gamers, and 75% of female gamers, playing these games online. In fact, these types of online games were the most popular category among those over 25 (ISFE, 2010, 73).

The survey identified some differences between male and female gamers. Female users of the DS are more than double of the number of males. On the other hand, all of the Sony platforms show a higher profile of male users. PS3 has a male to female user ratio of 3:1. Xbox 360 also shows a male profile; 5% of males are users and 3% of females. Overall, men and younger gamers are more likely to spend longer gaming and buy more games. They are also more likely to play online games (ISFE, 2010, 8).

3 Methodology

A brief survey of public library websites demonstrated that limited information about gaming activities is available via websites. For schools, the other main sector represented, the likelihood of gaming activities being easily discovered through publicly available websites is even less. It was therefore clear that to investigate the extent of gaming activities, it would be necessary to approach library staff directly.

Given the number of libraries in the UK and limited resources for this project, it was decided to attempt an online survey of UK libraries. A short questionnaire was devised to capture data about the extent of, and support for, gaming activities in libraries across all sectors in the UK. Some of the questions in the UK survey were based on those devised by Scott Nicholson and his colleagues at Syracuse University, with some adaptations for a UK audience¹.

An email asking for librarians to complete the survey was sent to a number of email lists including LIS-LINK, LIS-PUB-LIBS, YLG-LIST, Games in Libraries UK, Games in Libraries (US), Graphic Novels in Libraries UK, Virtual Worlds and Serious Games. It was also sent to a representative from all UK public library authorities, plus a number of schools library services and Games Workshop. The request was also mentioned on a number of blogs and Twitter feeds. The survey remained open for a month from 12th August 2010.

As the sample was self-selecting, naturally library staff with stronger views about gaming, be these positive or negative, would have been more likely to respond than those with little interest in the topic.

A total of 117 responses were received. Public libraries (63%) and school libraries (27%) were the most heavily represented sectors. The number of responses from each sector is given in the table below.

Sector	Number of responses	% of responses
Public	74	63%
School	32	27%
College	6	5%
University	3	3%
Joint use	1	1%
Special	1	1%
Total	117	100%

Table 1: Responses from each library sector

London (17%), the South East (16%), the West Midlands, the North West and Scotland (all 14%) were the regions providing the greatest number of responses. The geographical distribution of responses is given in the table below.

Region	Number of responses	% of responses
Channel Islands	1	1%
East Midlands	4	3%
Eastern	6	5%
London	20	17%
North East	4	3%
North West	17	14%
Northern Ireland	0	0%
Scotland	16	14%
South East	19	16%
South West	7	6%
West Midlands	16	14%
Wales	3	3%
Yorkshire	2	2%
Unknown	2	2%
Total	117	100%

Table 2: Responses from each region.

4 Findings

4.1 Gaming in library policy documents

In almost three-quarters of cases, respondents said gaming is not mentioned at all in library policies. Only 5% of libraries had policies prohibiting all gaming. However, in one-fifth of cases some gaming is prohibited. Just 2% of respondents said that their library's policy supports all types of gaming. Most of the restrictions relate to PC games. The ways in which these might be restricted include:

- No PC games allowed
- PC games only allowed if for educational purposes
- Filters block some gaming sites
- Gaming on PCs only allowed outside lesson times in school libraries
- Gaming allowed if PCs not required by another user
- Gaming only allowed on certain PCs
- Gaming allowed provided other users are not disturbed

- Gaming allowed at librarian's discretion
- Gaming allowed, but access to gambling sites prohibited.

Only one respondent said there was a restriction on board games and this was because the library was currently too busy.

It is possible to compare responses to this question to the findings of the 2007 US survey. While a similar percentage (4% in the US compared to 5% in the UK) prohibited gaming, only half the US libraries had no mention of gaming in library policy, compared to 73% of UK libraries (Nicholson, 2009).

The responses to this question from UK public and school libraries were analysed separately. This indicated that gaming is less likely to be mentioned in public library policies compared to schools where a more definite stance is taken in many cases. There were no school libraries where all gaming was supported and in 9%, all gaming was prohibited. This compares to just 3% of public libraries where this was the case. Some gaming was prohibited in 34% of school libraries, compared to just 14% of public libraries.

4.2 Borrowing resources

Sixty-nine libraries in the UK survey (59%) provide at least one type of gaming resource for customers to borrow. Console games are the most common resource customers can borrow; one-third of respondents said their library loaned console games. These are followed in popularity by PC games, which 21% of libraries said customers were allowed to borrow. Traditional games such as draughts and chess (15%), handheld games and wargaming resources (both 12%) are also popular loan items. Card games and roleplaying resources (both 3%) are the least common gaming resources available for loan. The graph below shows the responses.

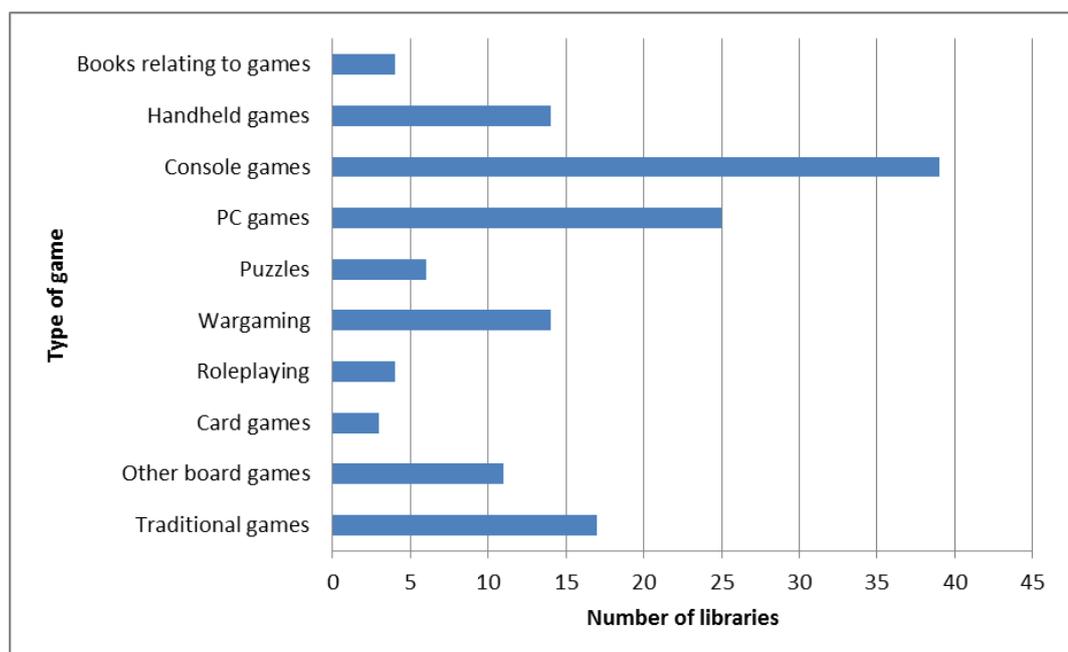


Figure 1: Resources customers may borrow

In the 2007 US survey, 41% of libraries surveyed loaned at least one type of gaming resource. This is lower than the percentage in the UK survey (59%). However, the percentage of libraries circulating PC games was similar in both countries, 25% in the US compared to 21% in the UK. The percentage of libraries having console games for circulation differed somewhat; just 19% of US libraries loaned console games (33% in the UK). More UK libraries also circulated handheld games, 12%, compared to 5% in the US survey. (Nicholson, 2009)

When the results of the UK survey are analysed separately for school and public libraries, there are some noticeable differences. While 68% of public libraries offer at least one type of gaming resource for loan, only 41% of school libraries do so. Traditional and board games are far more likely to be loaned by school libraries (in both cases, around 30% of school libraries compared to around 5% of public libraries). On the other hand, PC, console and handheld games are more likely to be available to borrow from public libraries.

4.3 Gaming in the library

The survey also asked about the gaming resources which customers are allowed to play within the library. 87% of libraries allow customers to take part in some type of gaming activity. When it comes to actually playing games in the library, traditional games such as chess and draughts are the most common, being allowed in 57% of libraries surveyed. This is closely followed by other board games and online games (both 44%). Wii (26%), Xbox 360 and PS2 (both 10%) are the most popular console games and DS (13%), the most popular handheld game. Wargames are also popular, being played in 28% of libraries surveyed. In addition, four respondents said that customers are allowed to play their own games in the library.

The graph below shows number of libraries in the survey which allow customers to play each type of game.

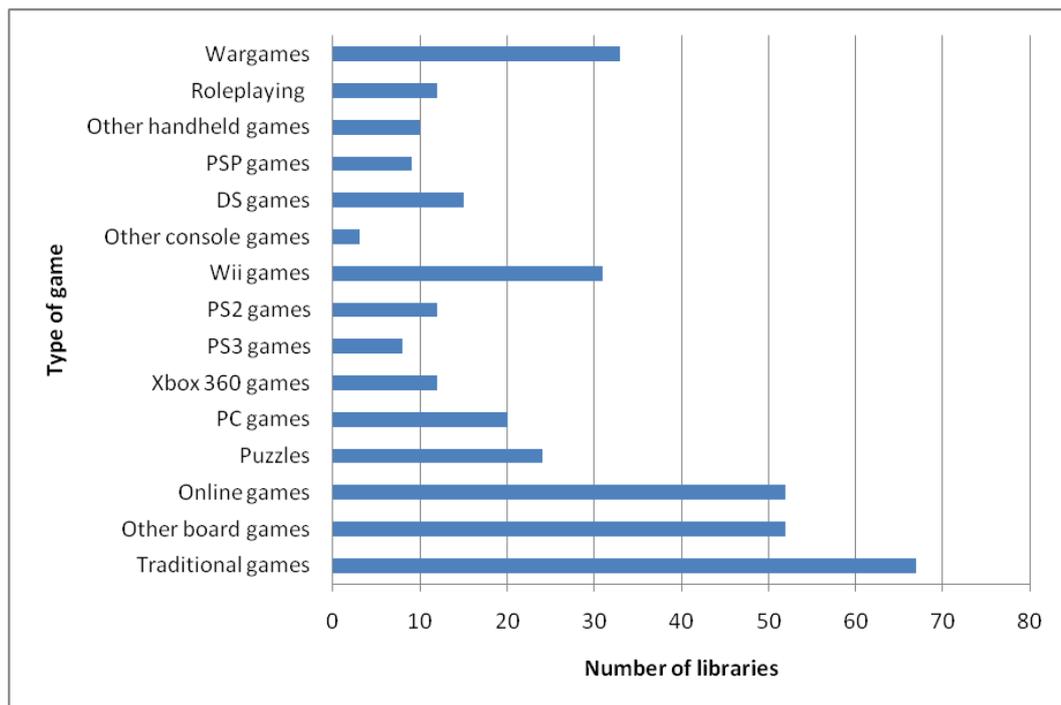


Figure 2: Games customers may play in the library

In the US survey, console games were the most common type of game to be used in the library, followed by board and card games, whereas in the UK, it was traditional games, followed by board games and online games. PS2 and Wii games were popular in both countries, but there was more support for Xbox 360 consoles in the UK survey (Nicholson, 2009).

Again, there are differences between school and public libraries in the UK. With the exception of traditional and board games which are more frequently played in school libraries, gaming is more likely to be allowed in public libraries. The greatest differences between the two sectors can be seen in the percentages of libraries allowing wargames, Wii games and online games. This is likely to be due, in part, to differences in resources available, but also in attitudes towards PC use which, according to respondents' comments, is likely to be focused on educational activities and can be more restricted in school libraries.

4.4 Gaming activities

71 survey respondents (61%) reported gaming activities which are run in the library. Details of the types of activities are given in the table below.

Warhammer wargaming clubs are the most common activity; these are run in just over one-quarter of the libraries taking part in the survey. Wii clubs are also popular. There are also a number of clubs encouraging the playing of traditional board games and card trading games.

Activity	Number of respondents
Warhammer/Warhammer 40K club	30
Wii club	11
Games Workshop club ⁱⁱ	10
Board games/traditional games club	7
Yu Gi Oh (card trading)	4
Online gaming club	2
Dungeons and Dragons club	2
Game design group	2
Other gaming club	12

Table 3: Gaming activities in libraries.

It is worth noting that some library-based gaming clubs are not run by library staff, but by parents or other volunteers, third party organisations or the gamers themselves. Several respondents said their library had run gaming clubs in the past, but these had ceased for a number of reasons including lack of interest, lack of specialist staff and limited space.

The percentage of libraries reporting gaming programmes in the US survey is lower at 40%. There is also a noticeable difference in the type of gaming activities supported. In the US, board games are the most popular activity, with 23% of libraries offering board game programmes; the figure was much lower in the UK survey, 6%. The percentage running console gaming activities is slightly higher in the UK, 9% compared to 6% in the US. (Nicholson, 2009)

4.5 Target audiences

From the findings of the Software Federation of Europe survey (ISFE, 2010) it is clear that gaming is not just confined to teenagers. Although teenagers are the most common target audience for gaming resources and activities in the libraries we surveyed, there are examples of provision from toddlers to older people. 78% of survey respondents provide gaming resources or activities for teenagers and 42% targeted young adults. Interestingly, working age (31%) and older adults (22%) were both more common target groups for gaming than children (14%) or toddlers (10%).

However, it is undoubtedly true that libraries often use gaming to attract young people, especially boys, into the library. 25 respondents (21%) explicitly referred to the value of games to attract young people to libraries and 6 (5%) saw attracting boys as a potential benefit. The quotes below demonstrate the benefits some respondents believed gaming can have in attracting these traditional non-users:

It brings all types of young people into the centre who may not in the past use a library or be seen in it! Students are more likely to read a book/comic whilst waiting to use the Wii, sometimes even borrow an item. (School library)

They come in! We use the consoles to attract our young people in. (Public library)

The boys who do Warhammer were not previous users of the library. Although they don't borrow much it does encourage the use of the library as a cool place to be, thus breaking down barriers. (School library)

4.6 The benefits of gaming

Among survey respondents, attitudes towards gaming in libraries were overwhelmingly positive. Only six respondents (5%) said there were no benefits attached to gaming in libraries or did not answer the question. A wide range of social and educational benefits for customers, as well as practical benefits for libraries, were identified.

The most commonly mentioned benefit (29 respondents or 25%) was that gaming resources and activities can attract new users to the library, especially those who might not be regular users otherwise. Spins offs of attracting new users are that they may make return visits to the library and also make use of the other resources and services on offer:

Increased footfall, young people discovering the library who may not have previously used our resources. (Public library)

Helps encourage young people into the library and can lead to use of our other resources including book stock. (Public library)

This echoes the findings from US surveys. When asked to select a single goal of gaming programmes, attracting new members was the most popular response, chosen by 35%. When asked about outcomes of gaming programmes, 76% said that gamers returning to the library to use non-gaming resources was an anticipated outcome (Nicholson, 2009).

Another important benefit of gaming is its role in supporting social interaction between groups who might not normally come into contact with each other, for example, through intergenerational activities. This was mentioned by 25 or 21% of respondents in the UK survey. Linked to this, 13 respondents (11%) felt that games could help to develop social skills such as negotiation, teamwork and understanding the importance of fair play:

Community cohesion - the Yu Gi Oh club enables children from different backgrounds to meet and play. The young people have ownership of the clubs and view the library as a place for them, where they are safe to come at any time and are welcomed. (Public library)

It gives teenagers a chance to come in to the library and have fun, as well as an intergenerational opportunity for the young and old to have fun together. (Public library)

Gaming is also thought to help to develop literacy, IT and broad mathematical skills (this includes skills such as problem solving, logic and strategic thinking):

Games Workshop games provide (mostly) boys with a reason to read, encourage use of number skills, development of social skills (fair play etc) and fine motor skills (painting). (Public library)

...the use of strategy, probability and maths, stimulation and development of creativity, artistic ability, imagination and hand-eye co-ordination. (School library)

On the other hand, simply the fact that games are fun was seen as a benefit by 13 (11%) respondents. This is, perhaps, linked to the fact that 8 respondents (7%) believed that gaming could help to change perceptions of the library and its staff:

We set it [gaming club] up with an aim to challenge perceptions of the library staff to young teens (boys in particular) and to challenge the boys' perceptions of libraries and library staff. (Public library)

Dungeons & Dragons activities have allowed me to get to know the pupils better and there is a greater respect shown. (School library)

We love gaming in libraries - it encourages people in to use our services. If they don't use our services now, then they look at libraries in a positive light so when they are ready to use them they feel comfortable to do so. (Public library)

The table below lists the benefits identified in full.

Benefit	Number of respondents	Benefit	Number of respondents
Attracts new users	29	Attracts boys	6
Social interaction	28	Fine motor skills	5
Attracts young people	25	IT skills	5
Mathematical skills	18	Creativity	4
Literacy skills	16	Encourages repeat visits	3
Fun	13	Personal confidence	3
Social skills	13	Makes library relevant to community	3
Encourages use of other resources	12	Increases PC use	3
Challenges perceptions of library	8	Fits with council policy	1
A safe space	7	Wider range of resources	1

Table 4: Benefits of gaming

4.7 The challenges of encouraging gaming

Despite all the positive aspects of gaming identified, 111 respondents (95%) identified at least one potential difficulty in encouraging gaming in libraries.

The fact that people playing games can create more noise than was usual in the library and the difficulty of managing behaviour was the challenge mentioned most frequently (by 40 respondents, 34%). In public libraries in particular, it was felt that this can lead to complaints from other users who want to concentrate on quieter activities:

Might possibly attract rowdy young people who have no interest in other library resources, and who might disturb other users. (Public library)

Getting the balance right between traditional users who want quiet and book borrowing only, and the new generation of users who want the fun and games. (Public library)

A lack of space was another common problem, especially when gaming is competing for space with other library activities:

Staff feeling it is not a good use of library space. Members of the public complaining about not being able to use tables as they are covered with gamers. (Public library)

Naturally, financial constraints can also limit involvement in gaming:

Many customers believe money should be spent on traditional resources, especially with enormous budget cuts taking place. (Public library)

The need to monitor gaming, especially in school libraries, for example, to ensure that no gambling takes place, is another difficulty:

Controlling safety for young people where games are played online. (School library).

The question of whether gaming is an appropriate activity for a library was mentioned by around one in ten respondents:

Could detract from core functions of access to information and reading for pleasure and leisure. (Public library)

The main purpose of the library as a study/research area would be reduced in the eyes of the users. (School library)

Furthermore, the fact that there was pressure on PCs which are needed for 'more important' uses was an additional barrier to encouraging gaming:

...online and PC gaming could be seen as problem due to the amount of time some users can dedicate to online and PC gaming resulting in a monopoly on IT resources and anti-social behaviour. (Public library)

Staffing gaming activities could be problematic, simply because too few staff are available, but also due to negative attitudes towards gaming:

Staff attitudes to noise and the occasional bout of boisterous behaviour can be negative. (Public library)

Staff cutbacks mean that staff cannot be allocated to gaming activities. (Public library)

A lack of knowledge of gaming among staff is another problem in some libraries. This can make it difficult to identify suitable resources and manage sessions effectively:

Need staff who are interested and knowledgeable to facilitate the sessions. (Public library)

Finally, reaching the target audience for gaming activities can be tricky as many are not traditional library users:

As much of the target audience is non-users getting the information and promotion out to the right audience is difficult. (Public library)

The table below lists the issues identified in full.

Difficulty	Number of respondents
Excessive noise/behaviour management	40
Complaints from other users	30
Lack of space	17
Financial constraints	16
Hard to monitor appropriate activities	13
Not appropriate in library	12
Limited PCs	11
Staff availability	10
Negative staff attitudes	8
Damage to games	7
Effective marketing	4
Staff knowledge	4
Identifying suitable resources	3
Could create bad publicity	2
PC filters block games	1

Table 5: Challenges associated with gaming in libraries

The survey asked what would encourage more gaming in libraries; respondents were asked to identify what they believed to be the most important factor, but several commented that several of the factors were equally important. Only three respondents felt that gaming should not be encouraged in libraries, although four

others said they were happy with the current level of gaming in their library, so would not want to expand.

A lack of awareness of the potential benefits of gaming among library staff and managers was felt to be the greatest barrier to gaming activity in libraries. This was chosen by 38% of survey respondents. Better staff knowledge and skills, more space, increased staffing and better IT facilities were all selected by approximately the same number of respondents (12-14%).

5 Discussion

Just 2% of UK libraries surveyed prohibit all gaming. However, the extent of support for gaming varies tremendously from library to library. Gaming does not currently feature in policy documents for many library services, especially public libraries. In general, gaming policy is more clearly set out in school libraries. Here, gaming is more likely to be restricted or prohibited than is the case in public libraries. With increasing interest in gaming, alongside budgetary pressures on libraries, library managers need to take a clearer lead in determining attitudes towards gaming, and its place in library policies. This includes setting out financial resources available, staffing, space and IT provision. In the absence of policy guidance, gaming activities usually rely on enthusiastic individuals with a personal interest. This can mean continuity is a problem when these members of staff move on.

Most libraries have limited gaming resources available for customers to borrow; even console games, the most popular resource, were only available in one-third of the libraries surveyed. Given the often prohibitively high cost of games, there is scope for libraries to expand their provision to provide access to gaming to less wealthy sections of the community.

Whilst console and PC games are the most common types of resources available for loan, online and traditional games are the most widespread when it comes to playing games in the library. Online games are the most popular activities in public libraries, but traditional games are more likely to be acceptable in school libraries. This may be due to differences in resourcing, but also to perceptions about the educational value of video games. It is interesting to consider such attitudes in the light of the European survey finding that the most popular online games are, in fact, simply versions of more traditional games in a new medium.

In the UK, wargames clubs, often supported by Games Workshop, are the most common gaming clubs in libraries. In addition, there are also a number of Wii clubs in public libraries and traditional games clubs in school libraries. However, staffing these activities can be difficult. It is argued that many libraries simply do not have sufficient staff. However, it is likely that many of these libraries manage to staff other more traditional activities, such as reading groups or storytimes. A more convincing argument is that there are insufficient library staff with sufficient knowledge or interest in gaming. While most librarians have an interest in books and reading, relatively few show the same level of enthusiasm for gaming. More support is needed for libraries without knowledgeable staff to support gaming. All library staff and managers should be made aware of the many potential benefits of gaming.

Although gaming is often thought of as an activity managed by young people's librarians, the audience for gaming activities in libraries is clearly not just teenagers; it spans the entire age range. It is therefore important that all library staff feel confident in being involved in gaming activities and promoting gaming resources to users.

Benefits of gaming for the gamers themselves include: opportunities for social interaction; the development of social skills; and improving literacy, numeracy and IT skills. Much has been written about the potential for gaming activities to foster the use of the library as a 'third place' (e.g. Adams, 2009), in particular bringing together people from different generations and backgrounds who would, otherwise, have little opportunity to meet. Scott Nicholson (2008) has described gaming as 'participatory storytelling' where, via interactions in the game, relationships can be improved between players outside the game.

Benefits for the library include: bringing in new users; attracting hard to reach users; gamers making use of other resources and also making return visits to the library; and helping to change non-users' perceptions of the library. Indeed, the use of gaming as a marketing tool, especially to reach underserved populations, is a concept which needs to be explored further.

However, while gaming activities can help to change perceptions of the library for the better among certain groups, there is also a fear that they could alienate other, more traditional, library users. One-quarter of respondents identified possible complaints from other users, especially about the level of noise and boisterous behaviour, as a barrier to further gaming activities. More practical difficulties libraries face include a lack of space and resources, especially when gaming is competing with other library services.

The negative attitudes of some library staff and managers is a major barrier to the future development of gaming in libraries. In order to overcome such attitudes and increase understanding of the value of games, it is necessary to clearly demonstrate how gaming can help the library fulfil its aims or mission. It needs to be more widely acknowledged that gaming can support the wider aims of libraries in a number of ways, including attracting hard-to-reach groups and increasing user numbers; developing literacy, numeracy and other skills; promoting the library as a third space where members of the community can interact socially; and promoting the use of other library resources, for example, games which can inspire further reading and research.

6 Conclusion

A lack of knowledge about the extent of gaming in UK libraries and its potential benefits has, to date, been a major barrier to challenging established perceptions. It is hoped that this survey will go some way to remedying this. However, more research is needed to investigate the potential benefits of gaming activities, for both libraries and gamers, in greater depth, perhaps through case studies of individual libraries which support gaming. These would also help to demonstrate practical ways in which gaming in libraries can be supported in terms of staffing, space and resources. Hopefully, this will lead to clearer direction in library

policies about the way in which gaming is to be supported and how it is expected to contribute to wider organisational goals.

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ⁱ See <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/VGWZKKM> for a list of survey questions

ⁱⁱ It is likely that other clubs mentioned are supported by Games Workshop, but only 10 respondents were explicit about this.