

What does an Xbox have to do with reading?

Elizabeth Beales, Barossa Council Public Library

Not only is technology changing the look and feel of a library with computers, e-books, i-Pods and the like, libraries are sometimes adopting an 'if you can't beat them...' attitude in some areas. One of those is in the way libraries reach out to young people.

Young adult males are one of the hardest groups to entice into a library. Aren't libraries dark, boring places with stern faced librarians? To prove to these young men that libraries aren't in fact dark, boring places, one trend recently taken up by many libraries is the installation of an Xbox console. Once inside the library, it is usually the case that these boys wander around and find magazines, music, DVDs, graphic novels and games that appeal to them and they often become frequent visitors and users of their library after that initial contact.

The Barossa Council Public Library joined several other SA libraries that have already experienced the 'Xbox revolution' and installing our own console in 2005. Funding for our unit and television came from the local chapter of the Lions group and also our dedicated Friends of the Library group.

An Xbox is an electronic gaming unit connected to a television which allows a variety of competitive, sometimes futuristic games to be played either solo or against another player. School holidays see the Xbox in great demand, and the successful 'Xbox play-offs', undertaken as a school holiday activity, are proving a hit. After school is obviously also popular, and with the inclusion of some younger children's games, many parents (particularly dads, funnily enough!) spend time at the console with their younger offspring playing these junior titles.

Buying a television with a remote control was a good idea, as the unit is positioned where staff on the desk can actually use it to adjust the volume without moving from their position! (And the looks on the faces of the unsuspecting kids is hilarious.)

If your library is considering the addition of a gaming console, it's worth doing some homework. Fortunately, just as it got to decision time, our council employed a young male

IT trainee, so I was able to handball that side of the operation to him, and he chose the Xbox, the TV, and the games titles. You need to keep in mind that all borrowers can see what's being played and generally little children are drawn to watching the 'big kids' so G or PG-rated games need to be purchased. (Although we're thinking about a night time staff playoff with some of the more mature M-rated games...)

I worked through setting up a policy for its use, and then decided that was too hard, so we just made a few basic rules, which are posted beside the console. These rules include 'No bullying', 'No swearing', 'Book in before you start to play' etc. Another basic rule, to make use less stressful for busy staff, is that the game in the console is the game that's played. We have a roster drawn up, showing which games are on when (change at lunchtimes) and that's it, no arguments. So far the kids have been fine, we have only had to ask one boy to leave and that's because we were worried as he'd been sitting there for over an hour... And we figured an hour of driving Homer Simpson round Springfield was long enough for anyone.

We haven't as yet secured our Xbox unit or controllers, though great storage boxes are available or can be made for this very purpose. The overwhelming majority of feedback from the public has been positive, we have occasionally heard 'it's too loud', or 'my children want to watch that instead of choosing books' and the like, these really are minor inconveniences, not problems. (Who was that saying 'discipline those children'?)

So, installing an Xbox in our library has proven a good decision and one that staff and borrowers are seeing as a positive. And what DOES an Xbox have to do with reading? Ah, it's the subtle way of getting reluctant readers through our doors, and showing them that turning pages is nearly as much fun as manoeuvring a joystick! ■



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