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PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND DIGITAL GAMES

A mutually beneficial relationship?

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the possible problems and benefits of including digital games in public libraries, specifically, if digital games and public libraries can be beneficial to each other and how. Public libraries are including digital games more into their functions, and digital games are becoming an ever-larger facet of society, proved by the increasing number of players and cultural influence digital games have. Discussing the benefits and problems associated with this cooperation reveals important insight into how and why public libraries might choose to include digital games in their operation.

The question is explored via a narrative literary review, using literature written on the topic of games in libraries and game culture, -literacy and -education. Most of the literature is written by librarians with very few contributions written from other perspectives. The main finding of this thesis is that the benefits of including digital games in public libraries outweigh the possible problems, making them a good option for libraries. However, the perspective when talking about digital games in relation to public libraries is very one-sided with no discussion on how digital game culture, -education and -literacy can benefit from being included in public libraries.

Keywords: Public libraries, digital games, game culture, game education, game literacy

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Digital games are increasingly important and influential in different facets of society. This can be seen in the number of players, as 76,1% of Finnish people play digital games (Kinnunen et al., 2018), and in how prevalent usage of digital games has become in education, leisure and entertainment. *Game culture, education and literacy* are also written about and discussed more by both academics and the general public. This increase in interest can be seen in public libraries as well, as many have started to include digital games more in events, as loanable materials and even in space considerations.

With this increasing interest it is important to discuss if and how digital games can be beneficial or problematic for public libraries, and also the benefits and problems public libraries pose for digital game culture, education and literacy. Much has been written on the subject from the library side, but a comprehensive review of the benefits and problems is lacking.

The focus of this thesis will be on digital games in public libraries specifically, because the potential digital games have for public libraries differs from academic and school libraries significantly thanks of their public nature. Digital games are chosen instead of games in general because other types of games have a rich history in libraries dating back to the 1850s in America (Nicholson, 2013), and digital games face the most scrutiny and criticism as the newest development in games while simultaneously offering unique benefits. The context of this thesis is in western public libraries without focusing on specific countries.

As for the structure of this thesis, after presenting some key factors and terms relevant to the thesis in theoretical framework, the research frame will be outlined. The main part of this thesis after the research frame will focus on presenting findings from the literary review in relation to the research question, considering both positive and negative sides of the topic before discussion and conclusions.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before exploring the topic of digital games in public libraries, it is important to discuss both public libraries and digital games in more depth. This section will present some important facts and points about both to set up the literary review findings and discussion to follow.

2.1. On libraries

Firstly, it is relevant to detail the aims and functions of libraries relevant to digital games. Libraries are not just collections of lendable materials. Their aims also include advancing reading, learning and varied literacies (Finlex, 2016), offering space and events that enable socializing and helping make information equally accessible for everyone (Adams, 2009). Other aims of libraries include advancing societal and cultural dialogue and offering spaces for learning, hobbies, working and civic action (Finlex, 2016). In short, the aims of libraries could be described as educational, social and democratizing (Adams, 2009). These aims show that the importance of public libraries as places that serve people and their needs in a multitude of ways is not diminishing.

Public libraries have always changed their materials and functions with times and discussed what belongs in libraries and what does not, making change an essential facet of public libraries. Spaces to read newspapers, language cafes and story time with children have all been new inclusions at some point. An example of the many things now thought of as obviously belonging in libraries that have not always belonged is loanable music records and even entertainment- or war literature (Mäkinen, 2009). Digital games are one of these new developments, even though even they have been a part of libraries for decades now, first in the form of computer games and later with console games. While gaming in the library started out small, and perhaps as a side-product of computers, game-positive librarians have affected opinions and advocated for more resources to add games to libraries. (Nicholson, 2013). Today, libraries use games as loanable materials and offer spaces to play in the library, while also holding events and clubs related to games.

2.2. On games

First, it is important to establish why digital games are worth discussing in relation to public libraries. Even though digital games are a fairly new development, they hold a significant place in not only popular culture and entertainment, but in other avenues like education as well. The significance of digital games can be seen in the latest *Pelaajabarometri* (Kinnunen et al., 2018), which shows that digital games are played by 76,1% of Finnish people. Digital games also have many significant documented benefits. These can, for example, be divided into emotional, cognitive, social and motivational benefits. (Granic et al., 2014). It must also be noted that discussion around digital games often focuses on their benefits and issues related to them, but digital games are also often just fun and pleasurable, and this is valuable in itself as well. Relevant to the research question of this thesis are also concepts of game culture, game education and game literacy. While all of these terms can refer to games as a whole, here they will relate to digital games specifically.

Game culture is a relatively new term and is often treated as common sense (Shaw, 2010), even though there is not a common, accepted definition for it. Of course, game culture itself is as old as games, and the same goes for digital game culture. There are many different facets of game culture, it is affected by many things and seen through many lenses, which shows in the diverse way scholars talk about game culture. Here, in order to create a definition just for the purposes of this thesis, this wealth of takes on game culture will not be further discussed. As for the purposes of this thesis, there is no singular game culture, but many sub-cultures divided for example by game genre, nations, locality and relation to global game culture (Sotamaa, 2009), or by other features. Game culture is a culture like many others, affected by and affecting many aspects but always centred around games.

Game literacy is also discussed widely and approached from multiple angles (Suominen et al., 2010), leading to similar complexity as game culture. Angles from which game literacy has been discussed can be divided, for example, into angles focusing on media education, game design and sociocultural aspects respectively (Suominen et al., 2010), or into functional and critical game literacy (Buckingham & Burn, 2007). Game literacy is a wide, complex skill and practice that is connected to game education, game culture and game capital within game culture. For this thesis, game literacy means a nuanced and

evolving understanding centred around games with the ability to read games as cultural artefacts with real-life impact but also as being affected by many things such as culture, players and game industry practices.

Game education is just as complex a term as the previous ones, connected especially to game literacy and thus can contain many topics discussed also in relation to game literacy. Game education is not restricted by age, it changes based on different needs, situations and time and can be a very broad topic. (Meriläinen, 2020). As such, here game education means generally education about and relating to games as an important sub-category of media education.

3 RESEARCH FRAME

3.1. Research question

The subject of this thesis is the relationship between digital games and public libraries, specifically if they can both be beneficial to each other and how. The aim is to find out if game culture and game education can benefit from being included in libraries, and if libraries can benefit from the inclusion of games. How this mutually beneficial relationship could be achieved is also considered, but not focused on. As such the research question is 'Can digital games and public libraries be beneficial to each other and how?'

3.2. Methods and data

The chosen research method for this thesis is a descriptive, narrative literary review. This method was chosen because it is good for providing a picture of a large topic, but most importantly because of how it can produce easy to understand results (Salminen, 2011).

The literature for analysis was collected using Andor, using relevant key words from all search fields and going through all results to find literature specifically about games in libraries. The keywords used include 'games' and 'libraries' together, 'games and libraries', 'games in libraries', 'game culture', 'game education' and 'game literacy' both in Finnish and English. The search was limited to scientific and peer reviewed results in English and Finnish. Literature was chosen by reading the title and abstract to determine if the article is relevant to the topic. Additional literature was acquired by finding the relevant references used by the already chosen studies, and identified as relevant based on their title and usage in the study they were found in.

Table 1. Search results.

	English	Finnish
‘games’ and ‘libraries’	391 820	38
‘games and libraries’	391 819	38
‘games in libraries’	391 819	32
‘game culture’	387 217	39
‘game literacy’	62 839	0
‘game education’	469 740	2

Table 1 shows the amount of search results with different key words in both Finnish and English. Because of the large amount of results in English, all results were not checked, as Andor sorts results based on relevancy and also presents non-relevant results. When new relevant articles had not been found for the last 20 results the search was discontinued. However, all the results in Finnish were examined as they were very few of them.

As the focus of this thesis is specifically digital games in public libraries, results that solely focus on academic or school libraries and non-digital games were excluded. However, much of the literature featured comments on more than one type of library or results also applicable to public libraries, in which cases they are included. Many sources also considered games as a whole, not just digital or non-digital games. These sources were included when their findings could be attributed to digital games or all types of games, including digital. From results relating to game culture, game literacy and game education articles that did not mention libraries were excluded, since the focus of this thesis is not game culture, literacy or education per se. After the elimination process, the number of sources to be used for the literary review in this thesis are 13.

4 RESULTS

The literature discussing digital games in public libraries has been mostly written by public librarians and is largely based on the librarian's own experiences of including digital games into their own libraries. Overall, the results and experiences with integrating digital games to libraries have been positive. The positive findings and results as well as how they were achieved will be presented first, before focusing on some criticisms and possible problems that are mentioned.

4.1. The benefits of digital games for public libraries

Digital games can answer many needs of public libraries from being available for lending as materials and fostering skills relating to literacies (Adams, 2009; Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005; Brown & Kasper, 2013) and technology usage (Nicholson, 2013; Brown & Kasper, 2013) to offering chances for socializing between diverse patron groups (Neiburger, 2007; Adams, 2009; Lipschultz, 2009; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014; Brown & Kasper, 2013; Nicholson, 2013) and building communities around games and libraries (Nicholson, 2013; Adams, 2009; Brown & Kasper, 2013; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). Digital games can also support educational goals (Adams, 2009), civic engagement (Lenhart et al., 2008), and reading (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). It is important to note that some of these benefits are best realized with a more structured game program while for some events or just having games and spaces to play available is enough. Next, these benefits of digital games and how they relate to the aims and needs of libraries will be considered, starting with the social and community building potential of digital games.

Playing digital games in the library is often a profoundly social activity (Lipschultz, 2009; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014), and the benefits of this reach further than just patrons playing together. For children especially games can help build socially valuable communication skills (Levine, 2009). Digital games are not only a solitary hobby but often encourage social interaction in the form of playing with others and forming communities around the games (Nicholson, 2013; Adams, 2009; Brown & Kasper, 2013; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). This social potential of digital games can be harnessed by libraries to encourage interaction between diverse user groups (Neiburger, 2007; Adams, 2009; Lipschultz, 2009; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). This in turn can increase library usage and engagement with library services by young people (Marjomaa & Oikkonen,

2014; Adams, 2009) and underserved patrons (Levine, 2009; Neiburger, 2007) as well as increase circulation of materials (Levine, 2009). Even though non-digital games also certainly have the possibility to do the same, digital games are attractive to a much wider audience, especially teens (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014; Adams, 2009). A popular way of using digital games for community building and encouraging socializing between different user groups and in general are game tournaments where usually a diverse selection of games is offered during the event for all interested patrons to play (Levine, 2009; Neiburger, 2007). The effects of these events can vary from increased patronage and interest in the library especially from teens (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014; Adams, 2009) to interactions between different age groups (Levine, 2009) and increased socializing in general (Nicholson, 2013; Adams, 2009; Brown & Kasper 2013; Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). Another way of including digital games to libraries are game programs, especially for youth (Brown & Kasper, 2013). These social situations and communal play libraries offer can also encourage civic engagement in young patrons, as playing and interacting with others in relation to games can make teens more likely to engage civically (Kahne et al., 2009). These are valuable benefits for libraries as the increased usage as a social space coincides with libraries aims to offer social spaces for their patrons, while the potential for increased civic interest fits in the democratizing aims of libraries (Adams, 2009).

Digital games can also be an asset in the aims of libraries to help its patrons learn and use different literacies (Finlex, 2016). When considering just general literacy, digital games can encourage reading not only texts directly related to games, but also books with topics similar to the games. It is not unusual at all for avid players of certain types of games to end up loaning books with similar topics to learn more about the things that interest them, for example Civilization players to loan history books. (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). Game programs can also give patrons opportunities to use and improve their reading skills thanks to the game-related reading opportunities and increased interest in traditional books with the same topics (Brown & Kasper, 2013; Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). The affordances of digital games also include new, technological literacies. Digital games can help in learning to use new technologies (Nicholson, 2013) and in improving already existing technology literacy, especially with game programs that are used to encourage the patrons to get familiar with and use different types of technologies in relation to games (Brown & Kasper 2013).

Information literacy is also a facet of literacy that digital games can teach. Games support and sometimes even require their players to engage in information seeking and management behaviours that can parallel those in real life and are important parts of information literacy (Adams, 2009). These behaviours used in relation to digital games include critical thinking and evaluation of multiple parallel information sources (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). Digital games have also been argued to coincide with the first four official information literacy standards set by the Association of College and Research Libraries, which include assessing information needs against the costs and benefits of acquiring information, accessing needed information in an effective and efficient way, thinking critically and using information to accomplish a purpose (Snyder, 2012). While these standards relate most directly to students of academia, these are nevertheless critical information literacy skills for even public libraries to teach to their patrons. Overall, digital games have a lot of potential for teaching different types of literacies from digital and media literacies (Gee, 2003) to information literacy (Adams, 2009) and reading (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). While game literacy is often thought to be a part of media literacy, it is not mentioned in the studies.

While the aims of libraries to help foster different literacies and offer spaces to be social and build communities are valuable, more material aims relating to usage and materials are just as important. As mentioned above in relation to the social and community benefitting aspects of digital games, digital games can also help increase circulation of materials (Levine, 2009) which are not limited to the games but also include books (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005). Overall, digital games can increase the patron's engagement with library services, not by just offering social spaces and interesting materials to loan out, but by offering positive interactions with the library (Levine, 2009; Neiburger, 2007) as well as increased connections between the patrons and staff (Levine, 2009). These increased connections between not only regular users but underserved audiences can increase usage of the library. Another very material aspect of libraries in addition to usage and material circulation is funding. While one of the challenges of bringing digital games to libraries can be lack of funding, which will be discussed in more detail later, digital games can also be used for fundraisers (Levine, 2009). While the example referred to in the study is of a mini-golf game, there is no reason that digital games would not be good for this as well, especially taking to account how versatile they can be.

As referred to when talking about the aims of libraries, the aims of libraries can be called educational in addition to social and democratizing because libraries offer spaces for learning, advance reading and literacies, support and guide information obtaining and usage as well as offer access to information (Finlex, 2016). While digital games are not incredibly relevant to offering learning spaces in libraries, digital games can otherwise help in providing and supporting education (Adams, 2009). As discussed above, digital games can help in acquiring and developing varied literacies (Adams 2009; Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005; Brown & Kasper, 2013) including reading, help with information obtaining in the form of fostering interest in related topics (Squire & Steinkuehler, 2005) and teaching about new things in the form of educational games, which have been included in many libraries for a long time (Neiburger, 2007). Even non-educational video games can function as sources of knowledge, for example history (Thomas & Clyde, 2013). Digital games can also help children build problem-solving skills (Levine, 2009; Brown & Kasper, 2013) which can be said to be another facet of education.

4.2. The problems with digital games in public libraries

Next, problems and challenges with bringing digital games to public libraries will be considered. These issues often stem from the limitations of the libraries or from certain aspects of the games, not from the suitability of games to libraries overall.

Most of the possible issues with including digital games to public libraries have to do with the limitations of libraries in space and resources such as staff, expertise and budget. Not having proper spaces to set up gaming can make gaming disruptive because of noise (Adams 2009). The lack of space can make larger game events completely impossible as well, if the library is too small or lacks spaces where many patrons can congregate at the same time. Another issue with space is where the games are located, since placing the games in an area meant for children can accidentally exclude adults (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). Noise issues are not solely related to lack of space though, since playing games can cause excess noise most likely stemming from excitement (Brown & Kasper 2013) even though disruptiveness is rare. Arguing over games is also possible, but again, not very common (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014).

Lack of resources is also a possible problem. Without a proper budget, keeping a good collection of games, having enough hardware and holding events can be hard (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). Expertise and staff are also limited resources without which

implementing digital games successfully can be difficult. Knowing what games to buy and how to hold game events or clubs successfully is a skill not everyone has. Game clubs and events also take up staff time in addition to needing knowledge about games and in the case of game clubs, capability of controlling the players (Brown & Kasper, 2013). Without necessary knowledge from the staff, working with third parties with more experience around games would be a fruitful possibility, but rarely used (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014).

5 DISCUSSION

From this look into digital games in public libraries, it is easy to see that the attitude towards digital games from library staff is mostly positive. A lot is being done and explored, and librarians are sharing their experiences and encouraging others to experiment with digital games. It is clear to see why; for public libraries digital games can offer a lot of benefits with very few downsides. However, the literature is very one-sided as it is written mostly from the perspective of library staff. The discussion around games and libraries overall is mostly focused on how to implement games to libraries and what benefit games can serve to libraries, and the same is true for digital games and public libraries specifically. This is understandable, as librarians would naturally be most interested in how to benefit their libraries. It would however be beneficial for people outside of the library to also take an interest in this relationship, especially game scholars interested in advancing game culture, game education and game literacy. Public libraries can offer just as many opportunities for digital games as the other way around, but so far, only librarians have really participated in the discussion. It is thus justified to say that the discussion on the topic so far is interesting and has potential, but a lot is still lacking. Thus, before discussion about the literary review, how well public libraries fit to the needs and aims of digital game culture, - game literacy and - game education will be considered. Even though all three affect each other, they will be considered separately for clarity.

Game culture is large and multi-faceted, consisting of so many actors it is hard to pin down. However, as culture is created by people together, an important benefit public libraries can offer for the development of game culture is new members through introducing games to people who otherwise would not have found them or had access to them. Public libraries can also facilitate social play and discussion about games in both game clubs and events, both important for the growth and evolution of game culture. History of games is also a part of game culture (Cade & Gates, 2017) and public libraries can do their part in both preserving this history and making it available and accessible for players by including both new and old digital games and consoles in their collections.

Game literacy of patrons can be significantly improved by the efforts of public libraries. This is because, just as with game culture, without access to digital games, forming a digital games literacy is impossible. It is also useful to consider both functional and critical game literacy (Buckingham & Burn, 2007), which are both developed by having access to games and by having peers and mentors to discuss games with respectively.

Game events and game clubs where knowledgeable library staff act as guides and discussion about digital games is facilitated can be good opportunities for developing game literacy.

Game education and game literacy are closely related, and thus the same affordances public libraries can offer for developing game literacy also apply to game education. When considering younger patrons, game clubs can be especially effective thanks to the more thought out approach. This is not to say that adults do not also need game education or that they cannot benefit from it (Meriläinen, 2020). Having both digital games and knowledgeable staff available can help in the game education of all patrons.

Possible problems for games when included in libraries are few, but significant. There is a risk in libraries making choices on what digital games are suitable for libraries. Public libraries do not often have official guidelines on what games are chosen and how and lack a well-planned budget for game purchases. Libraries also often prioritize children's games over games for adults. Sometimes certain game types are also excluded (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014). Public libraries also might not have good enough hardware to run all types of games. These can all work together to create an inconsistent, lacking collection that prioritizes certain views on acceptable games and game culture over others. These also affect game education and game literacy, as not offering access to and discussion of certain types of games makes game literacy and – education lacking. These can be possibly solved with increased budget and staff knowledgeable about digital games with not just the best interests of libraries but games in mind as well. The last issue can be seen in how the research referred to in this thesis talks about games and even in how the inclusion of games is often justified – games are often seen as valuable because of the benefits they can provide and not as inherently valuable outside of these benefits. This point of view on games forgets how important games can be even without any additional social, educational or other benefits. When arguing for the inclusion of games and talking about their many benefits, it is thus important to keep in mind the intrinsic value of games.

Moving on to discussion about the results, when considering the few downsides of including digital games to libraries, the sources mostly mention them without offering many possible solutions. Still, there are certainly solutions available, some easier to implement than others. For example, a common issue with a lack of space or a space ill-fitting for gaming is not easily solved without sometimes extensive renovation. However, lately some bigger libraries in Finland have included more game-suitable spaces as parts

of their renovations, such as the Hämeenlinna public library and the Oodi library in Helsinki. While this certainly is not an option for many smaller libraries with more limited budgets, it could be showing a trend in trying to modernize old library buildings to fit the changing needs of the patrons. Noise is also mentioned as a possible problem, which could be solved with dedicated spaces, staff supervision especially during events and clear rules about acceptable noise levels. However, the needs of patrons are changing, and libraries are adding more opportunities for socializing in the form of clubs and language cafes, making noise a much more acceptable part of libraries. Lack of resources such as knowledgeable staff and budget are issues not only related to digital games and certainly a big problem especially in smaller libraries. There is no direct solution for this, except to be creative. An indirect solution that digital games can provide is slowly increasing usage of the library, which in turn could increase the budget allocated for public libraries. Staff knowledge is also a resource that will grow with use, especially since already in 2013, 55% of library personnel played digital games (Marjomaa & Oikkonen, 2014), a number that will only go up as digital gaming increases. Many of these issues however are quite small compared to the many benefits detailed before and make digital games an option that should be considered in every public library.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, the aim has been to use a narrative literary review to look at literature written about including digital games to public libraries, and so determine if digital games and public libraries could be a beneficial match for both and how. As the literature written is very lacking in perspectives other than that of librarians, the results found can only answer the question from the side of libraries.

For public libraries, including digital games has many benefits. Digital games can boost attendance and library usage, encourage socializing across diverse patron groups along with community building, help in developing and improving multiple literacies as well as technology skills, support education, encourage civic engagement and make patrons read more. The aims of public libraries overall could be summed up as democratizing, social and educational and digital games can support all these aims. The problems with including digital games to public libraries include lack of space and resources such as budget, staff and expertise, as well as noise issues and arguing over games.

Overall, attitudes and experiences seem to be mostly positive and problems very few, making it possible to suggest that public libraries can benefit from the inclusion of digital games, if implemented with care and attention to detail. However, as the issue has not been written about from the side of game culture, it is impossible to determine if and how digital game culture, education and literacy can benefit from being included in public libraries. Discussion about this has been included in this thesis with the hope that in the future, digital games in public libraries will be considered from more diverse perspectives.

There are some important limitations of this research that must be discussed. First, only focusing on English and Finnish results could have resulted distorted data. It is entirely possible that other countries might have different experiences with including games in libraries, but these experiences were not considered because they were not written in English. These results are also only applicable in western libraries with similar library traditions, as there was no literature found on libraries other than in the west. The largest limitation of this study is that the research question was not answered in its entirety because of the lack of sources on the subject from a game perspective. Thus, looking at games in libraries from the perspective of games would be a valuable avenue for future research.

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