

# Playing the game: expanding the public library's concept of story

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## Background

In 2003 Christchurch City Libraries won \$1,500 in a lucky draw held by the Council's Children's and Youth Advocacy Team at the launch of its consulting-with-children website, *Kids Toolbox*. It was decided to use this money to consult with our library customers – children, adults and colleagues – about the recent availability in our libraries of electronic stories and games – Playstations as well as the longer established computer games and CD ROM stories. These views and perceptions would help inform the Library's current directions and benefit future planning.

## Research report: '*Hearing what they think*'

### Objectives of the consultation:

1. To compare preschoolers' preferences for playing interactive electronic stories and games with their preferences for other activities available in the library.
2. To discover the attitudes of children (aged 5-12) and adult customers to the interactive CD ROM stories, Internet games, Playstations and Xboxes available for children to use in the library, and to determine the reasons for their attitudes.
3. To identify how library colleagues view the presence of the interactive CD ROM stories, Internet games, Playstations and Xboxes provided for customer use in the library, and the reasons for their views.

## Methodology

A predominantly qualitative research approach was used.<sup>1</sup> A sample of customers in three age bands – pre-schoolers, children 5-12 years, and adults – were interviewed at four libraries during June and July 2004. All of the libraries had interactive CD ROM stories and provided access to Internet games. Two of the libraries also had Playstation and Xbox games. A total of 120 customers were interviewed – 30 at each library and 40 from each customer group. In addition, two focus groups were held with colleagues from across the library network.

A pilot study was carried out prior to beginning data collection to assess the clarity of the interview questions and to determine the degree to which they elicited the data required. As this was the first time the library had formally consulted with preschool-aged children, the pilot was particularly useful in confirming that they were able to comprehend the questions asked and to respond appropriately.

## Results

### Preschoolers

40 preschoolers were interviewed (22 boys and 18 girls). Each child was shown four pictures representing different activities available in the library – looking at a book, listening to a story with a parent/caregiver, playing on a computer, and listening to a story read by a librarian.

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<sup>1</sup> Some quantitative data is reported but due to the small sample size it cannot be applied to the whole population of library users and is indicative only. No statistical analysis was performed on this data.

Using the pictures, the child was asked to indicate his/her favourite library activities in order of preference.

Playing on the computer was the favourite library activity among the preschoolers in this study (77% indicated that this was their first choice). Looking at a book was the second most popular preference, while listening to a story with a parent/caregiver and listening to a librarian read a story rated less highly than the other two activities.

Although the sample of children surveyed was not large enough to apply these results to the whole population of preschool library users, the results clearly indicated that playing interactive electronic stories and games was a very popular activity amongst this age group. Anecdotal observations of preschoolers' behaviour in the library from staff and parents further confirmed these results.

### **Children (aged 5-12)**

40 children were interviewed (17 boys and 23 girls). These were divided into two groups – younger children (5-7 years) and older children (8-12 years). The children were asked about their use of and opinion about the library's electronic story and game resources, the reasons for their opinions, and their favourite library activity.

- 30% of the children interviewed had played a CD ROM story on a library computer. The majority had enjoyed doing this and liked the interactive nature of the stories.
- 73% of children interviewed had played a game on a library computer and all of them enjoyed doing this, many commenting on the challenging and interesting nature of the games.
- More than a quarter of the children interviewed had played a Playstation or Xbox game at the library.<sup>2</sup> Most of these were in the older age group (8-12 years) and almost all of them had enjoyed this activity.

Playing games on the computer and reading a book rated equally highly as the favourite library activity amongst the children interviewed. To some extent experience in using the resources had an effect on the child's preferences, with the children who had used multimedia resources in the library tending to favour those activities.

The older children were asked some additional questions about the suitability of these resources to the library environment. More than half thought that Internet and Playstation/Xbox games should be available in the library, with small numbers of children either against, undecided or in favour of Internet games but not Playstations/Xboxes.

The following reasons were given to support the presence of electronic games resources in the library:

- They are fun to play / alleviate boredom.
- They provide an alternative activity for those who do not want to read books.
- They give children something to do while their parents are reading or looking for books.
- They can be educational (get information, develop reading and computer skills).
- Electronic stories allow children who cannot read or whose parents are too busy to read to them to access stories which they can listen to by themselves.
- They encourage children to use their imagination.

The reasons against having these resources in the library were:

- The library is a place for reading books, not playing games.
- The games distract children from reading the books in the library.

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<sup>2</sup> This figure appears low but it should be noted that these resources were only available at two of the four libraries where the study took place.

Those children who did not approve of having electronic games in the library were generally not opposed to the resources themselves. When asked, they were able to identify some positive features of these resources, even if they did not believe that the library was the appropriate venue for them. Children interviewed in the two libraries which had Playstations and Xboxes demonstrated higher rates of approval for these resources than those in libraries without them. There was also a correlation between experience in using the resources in the library and approval of their presence there. There was no significant difference between boys and girls in their level of approval of the electronic games.

### **Adults**

40 adult customers were interviewed (16 males and 24 females). 21 of these were parents or caregivers of children within the age range of this study. Few had used any of the library's electronic games for children.

The majority (88%) of those interviewed approved of having interactive CD ROM stories for children to use in the library. Just under half did not approve of Internet games and Playstations/Xboxes in the library. 28% were in favour and a further 20% were undecided.

A variety of reasons were given to support having electronic stories and games in the library:

- Provides another medium for children to access stories and encourages reading (particularly for children who cannot read or are not interested in reading).
- Develops children's computer literacy.
- Encourages learning in a way which is also fun.
- Provides equity of access to computers (for children who do not have them at home)
- Attracts children to the library, especially those who would not normally use libraries.
- Suits the changing role of the library in the modern world.
- Encourages social interaction and fosters cooperation amongst children.

Reasons against the presence of electronic stories and games in the library were:

- Discourages children from reading books.
- Encourages overuse of computers.
- Does not fit the role of the library (which should be limited to information and education, not entertainment).
- The noise generated from game-playing is disruptive and compromises the ability of others to enjoy the library environment.
- Playstation and Xbox games promote violence.<sup>3</sup>
- Encourages physical passivity and discourages social interaction.
- Use of public money to fund "frivolous" resources is not appropriate.

Of those who were undecided about the merits of electronic stories and games in the library, some did not like these resources in general, but were resigned to the fact that they are part of our modern world and that children enjoy them. They may not want their own children to play games in the library but did not wish to prevent other people's children from doing so. Others approved of the library having these resources only if the games had an educational component. Most of those interviewed acknowledged that these multimedia resources had some value – either educational or recreational – even if they did not believe that the library was the appropriate venue for them.

### **Colleagues**

Two focus groups were conducted with a sample of colleagues from across the library network. Sessions were semi-structured and colleagues were asked for their opinions about

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<sup>3</sup> None of the customers who expressed this view had played one of the games available in the library.

the library's electronic stories and games, the reasons for their opinions, and their experience of customer reactions towards these resources.

Colleagues generally expressed a positive view towards the presence of the library's electronic stories and games. They believed that these resources attracted new customers, met the needs of a more diverse range of users and promoted the library as an attractive destination for families. A range of concerns were also expressed however. These centred mainly on noise levels, some examples of negative behaviour associated with children playing the games, and whether or not the provision of these resources should be a core function of the library. While there was agreement that the provision of these resources was successful in attracting children to the library, there was a divergence of opinion on whether this subsequently led them to using other library resources such as books. For others, this was less important and the fact that children enjoyed playing the stories and games, were becoming familiar with the library environment and were developing positive attitudes towards the library was justification enough for the inclusion of these resources.

Most of the staff interviewed were confident in their understanding of the reasons for the provision of these electronic stories and games. However, their understanding did not always translate into a consistent response to questions and feedback from customers regarding these resources.

## Development Report

Following on from *Hearing what they think* a Development Report was prepared for the library's Strategic Leadership Team. It outlined the library's current rationale for including electronic games in its range of library services; suggested how this rationale could be expanded and supported; and made recommendations for future developments.

### Report summary

At present our customers have access to internet games, while all libraries have PCs loaded with children's CD ROM stories and games. New Brighton, Parklands and South libraries have Playstations and Xboxes and Upper Riccarton, due to open in early 2006, will have these as well.

The current Collection Development Policy does not include games specifically, only a brief mention of 'electronic resources'. The Library's policy *Interactive and audiovisual resources for use in libraries* gives some very general reasons for having electronic games. It says:

*"Christchurch City Libraries' purpose is to inform, educate, entertain, involve and inspire. Its libraries may include resources in a wide range of media and formats, offering customers access to print, film/fiche, audiovisual (e.g. Sky television) and interactive resources (e.g. Playstations, Xboxes and computer games) to support their leisure, information, community and lifelong learning needs."*

This policy does not provide details of:

- How decisions are made about what games software and hardware are purchased
- What the selection criteria are
- Which libraries these games will be made available at
- What the relationship is between games and other resources
- Specific reasons for the educational and recreational benefits offered by gaming technology, including results of local and international research

Inclusion of games has, up to now, been on the basis of creating points of difference for new libraries and/or to attract new customers. The Library's Development Plan, however, makes no distinction between new or longer-established libraries as far as games entitlements are concerned. The *Hearing what they think* report discovered that while there were mixed attitudes towards the library's provision of electronic games for children on the part of both

customers and colleagues, the direction that the library had taken with regard to providing these was in keeping with the expectations of many of our customers.

Overseas and local research supports the benefits and advantages of electronic multimedia, particularly games, in children's and adults' learning. Locally, a detailed report by John McKenzie on the *eyeMagic* project<sup>4</sup> states that *"AR [augmented reality] offers unique educational benefits: firstly, there can be a seamless interaction between virtual and real communicative environments that results in value added user interactions; secondly, the seamlessness between physical and virtual objects in AR environments presents new teaching/learning strategies even for children with limited computer experience and finally, the immersive and animated possibilities of AR means that texts are no longer static objects but enable new interactions with learners."*<sup>5</sup>

"Games literacy" has been identified as having several benefits; namely as a form and means of entertainment; social development; expression and representation. These benefits increase in a learning environment and especially when children have the opportunity to create their own games. One research report stated that *"recreational computer game players engaged in complex cognitive processing when playing such games. Many of these cognitive processes are also valued in educational settings."*<sup>6</sup>

While this research shows there are some benefits to the provision of electronic games these benefits come with *caveats*, for example the need for educational contexts to support learning. Nearly half of the customers surveyed in the *Hearing what they think* report linked Playstations with entertainment rather than education and therefore perceived them as having little or no relevance in a library setting.

The Development Report recommends, amongst other things, that we develop a strategic framework around the availability of electronic games in our libraries. This will include a timeframe for introducing, for example, Playstations/Xboxes into some longer-established libraries. The report also states that we should write protocols for ongoing selection of games hardware and software and its placement in libraries using, as a basis, the existing policy. Customers and colleagues should be provided with a document that outlines the framework and the supporting rationale, including summary results from research documents.

The positive responses to electronic games in libraries as described in the research report will allow us to develop programmes that highlight their educational as well as entertainment benefits. A successful model in this respect is the series of 3D animation workshops run by the South Learning Centre (located at the South Library) in partnership with the Human Interface Technology Laboratory of the University of Canterbury. Future initiatives might include games development sessions. The co-location of electronic games with other media, particularly print resources, needs to be considered carefully so that they are seen as complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

Having assessed the impact of what were essentially ad hoc decisions made to meet immediate rather than long term goals, we must build on what we have already done. One industry expert recently *"called for games that can resonate with people's ideas, beliefs and emotions in the way [films do]; games that leave you moved, and that stay with you, just as a great novel might do."*<sup>7</sup> And, as author Julius Lester has said: *"As humans we want to express as much as is in us and no single art form is sufficient to the enormity of the task."*

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<sup>4</sup> An AR (Augmented Reality) children's picture book which was launched at the South Library and displayed in South and Central Libraries and is currently at Linwood Library.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.hitlabnz.org/fileman\\_store/2004-eyeMagic\\_workshop.pdf](http://www.hitlabnz.org/fileman_store/2004-eyeMagic_workshop.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Journal of research in computing in education, Fall 1999, v 32, n1 and [http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=1397&1397\\_1=10817](http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=1397&1397_1=10817)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story\\_id=2110135](http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story_id=2110135)

Perhaps what libraries need to do is continually reinvent themselves as centres of 'story', aligning themselves with all the various forms of narratives – oral, print, digital – that seek to define us.