GAMES, GAMERS, & GAMING
Adults Only
By M. Brandon Robbins

My wife and I went to a Dave & Buster's recently. For those of you unfamiliar with the franchise, it serves food and drinks, but the games are the main draw. You buy a prepaid card and use it to enjoy a wide variety of video games and carnival-inspired diversions. It's basically an old-school arcade—low lighting, all the games at full volume, most games spewing out tickets you can exchange for prizes—with a bar right in the middle of it.

It's geared toward adults, and, in fact, it has a policy that no one under 18 is allowed unless accompanied by someone over 21. It's meant to be a place for grown-ups to relax, eat, drink, and play. In an increasingly child-friendly society, this seems like a recipe for corporate suicide, but the D&B's brand is very successful. The location we visited had no shortage of customers.

Grown-up gamers

We often tout the advantages of gaming-based programming and services for children and teens, and increasing interest in your library for the younger set is most definitely a worthy use of your gaming resources. However, adults like to play as well; grown-up gamers vastly outnumber teen and juvenile players. According to the most recent sales, demographics, and usage data study by the Electronic Software Association, the average age of the American gamer is 31. Only 29 percent of gamers are under 18; 39 percent are over 36.

What does all this mean for libraries? Simply put, if you don't offer gaming experiences that are geared specifically for adults, you are theoretically cutting out up to 71 percent of your patron base from your game-oriented programs.

It's important to offer activities geared specifically to children and teens, and

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there's no harm in making most of your programs all-ages-friendly. However, not every adult wants to attend a program where children and teens are present. Libraries offer adult-oriented speakers, films, book clubs, and materials collections; gaming should be no different.

Designing activities for adult gamers is on a par with creating one specifically for teens: find out what adults are playing, and offer those games. Advertise that the program is specifically for adults, define the minimum age, and declare that proof of age (a picture ID, for example) may be required. Stock up on food and beverages (you may want to skip the junk food and go for heavy hors d'oeuvres, but I've yet to run into a gamer of any age who would turn down Doritos and energy drinks), and open your doors. A free-play day with board games and video game stations set up or an organized tournament (or both) would be very successful.

Programs that pop

Designing a program for the over-18 crowd would open up avenues for games you may not normally go for, those with darker themes and more challenging content. This would give you a chance to integrate M-rated titles such as the "Call of Duty" series into your competitive play. Older gamers may be more open to slower-paced, more demanding board games (such as *Pillars of the Earth* or *Android: Netrunner*), but it would also let you try out some new ways of integrating gaming into your programming.

A gamers' club that is structured like a book club and focuses on single-player games could be a hit for adults. Games such as *Dragon Age: Inquisitor*, *Fallout: New Vegas*, and the upcoming *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* are set in dark fictional worlds with winding political maneuvers and real-world cultural analogs; the stories that gamers craft in these games would make for excellent discussion, especially among mature patrons with a sharper eye for the subtext that these games offer.

To give your group a narrower focus, you could expand your programming to include conversations on major topics and controversial issues in the gaming industry. Everything from the depiction of women and minorities to the corporate ethics of downloadable content is ripe for debate. Additional sources such as Anita Sarkeesian's YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women* would help stir discourse.

Gaming the system

Starting a gaming group or setting aside a programming slot specifically for adults shows that the library acknowledges that adults need recreation, too. Patrons who only come in during tax season or when their printer breaks down, or who bring their kids in to check out books and go to story time may be excited to find something for them as well. You could even build some serious synergy by scheduling a children's program simultaneously in a separate area, so the adults and kids can play at the same time. You'll increase program attendance and build a broader patron base while the patrons have fun.

A child-free environment for enjoyment and socializing doesn't always have to involve alcohol and racy entertainment; game night at the library can be adults-only while still being safe, clean, and welcoming to all. Offering adults-only gaming programs will only make your patrons more diverse, more trusting, and more enthusiastic.

Until next time, keep telling yourself, just one more level.