

ENGAGING KIDS WHERE KIDS ARE AT: THE ELTHAM LIBRARY PROJECT

Victoria Osborne *Freelance writer Melbourne Victoria*

This article is about teen services at Eltham library, a branch of Yarra Plenty Regional Libraries in northeastern Melbourne. Eltham staff used the playing of the international computer game, Runescape, to attract teens and preteens, particularly boys, to the library. Described are how the library involved youth in planning the Runescape project, adaptations after the project began and how the project attracted community attention and support for the library. This article first appeared in the US 'Public library quarterly' 16(3/4) 2007. It is published with the permission of its publisher The Haworth Press.

Where do you think your teenage boy is today? Where would you expect truants to hang out in this tough modern world? Where would you imagine adolescent boys are taking risks until late at night? Your local library?

Libraries have made concerted efforts to connect with the community over the last few years, including storytimes for toddlers, book clubs for older kids and widening collections to contain not only books of all shapes but also dvds, videos and computer games. Most modern libraries have a popular computer area and offer a service assisting older folk to get online.

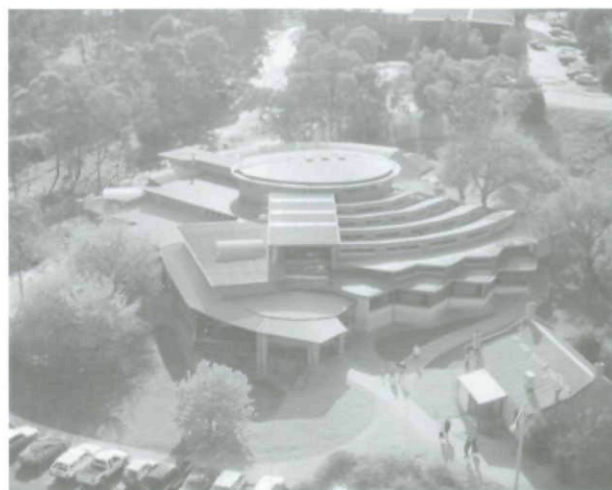
The Eltham librarians found the computers were attracting more than retired people researching their family tree, unemployed artists brushing up their cvs and bridge players picking up tips from American newsgroups. Suddenly the computer area was crowded with teenage boys. They were attracted by an international internet game called Runescape.

Runescape is a medieval massively multiplayer online role playing adventure game (MMORPG) designed by Jagex Ltd. It works on several different levels. A large part of the virtual environment is cost free and young people from all around the world conquer monsters, quests, learn medieval skills and get tricked out of large sums of treasure and weapons. They can even be lured into the deep dark forest and killed. If you want to know more, ask any adolescent boy (some girls do play, but not for long). At any time one hundred and fifty thousand people can be playing Runescape. Each world can only hold two thousand and if a world is full then it gets very crowded. 'Lucky you can walk through people or you'd be stuck all the time', says thirteen year old Jim Nexus.

With the teenagers in the library came certain problems, amongst them conflict, noise and truancy. Hilda Gregory, Eltham librarian, said the staff noticed that some of the young people liked to play Runescape all day. The librarians were seeing addictive behaviours. 'They were forgetting to go to the toilet, forgetting to eat, interfering with the other kids and not sharing.' Staff worried about the young men and the problems were discussed during several staff meetings.

The Eltham Library

The library was designed by Gregory Burgess Architects, built in mud brick and timber and completed in 1993. Outside is a sweeping veranda, guiding the community into a flowing foyer built around an open fireplace surrounded by gallery space that swings around and up to the main doors of the library. The domed ceilings make each space of the library seem enclosed though always inviting to the next section. The curved walls and undulating ceilings make the library feel like the inside of a shell, giving the space an enfolding safe ambiance. It is well lit by natural light and at night seems to glow. There is even a café looking out into trees. This is a welcoming



place designed to be used in comfort by people of all ages.

All the Eltham library computers time out after half an hour but if every computer was being used for Runescape, was everyone getting a fair go? Hilda says the library did not want to have a booking system – sometimes people do need to spend two hours or just half an hour on the computer. A booking system would take up too much of the librarians' time and not allow the casual flexibility the users prefer.

Problems

Some libraries have banned Runescape. Some boys have been banned from libraries. After considering different solutions, Eltham library restricted the numbers of computers available for Runescape. Hilda Gregory said 'There is value in the kids being here, so long as they're safe.' She added they might look at something else while they are waiting, borrow a book or do their homework on one of the other computers. The computers designated for Runescape face the information desk, under the constant supervision of busy librarians.

Even so, the problems continued. The young people interrupted staff for extra time or to be logged on just when they wanted to. Conflict with other users and their own peers persisted. Some of the boys were staying until 8.30pm. Were they safe to travel home in the dark? The library decided to turn to the council for help.

Solutions

Wendy Costigan, the manager of Eltham library, mentioned the problem at one of the regular group meetings with Nillumbik Council. The message was heard by Deb Ruiz-Dove, a project officer with Nillumbik Shire Council youth services. It was her team that initiated the project meetings with library staff, Jocelyn Courtney, Kylie Peters and arranged to bring in Liam Bantock, a youth worker from Greensborough Salvation Army. As Liam had interest and skill in computers, he was very happy to become involved although he normally played sports type games, not Runescape.

Jocelyn Courtney is a counsellor with the youth and family team from Nillumbik community health service. As she says in her letter to parents, 'the library staff were keen to have these young men continue to use the library facilities as long as other users were not

disadvantaged by their presence'. Jocelyn felt there were no particular risks arising from the game itself but the other complications, such as the boys playing for long periods of time, not taking appropriate breaks, not having lunch, not drinking, no exercise and absconding from school, were problematic. Jocelyn had been aware of the library's problems even before its approach. One of the young clients of her youth and family team had been banned from every library in the shire. She was very interested in talking to the library about a combined program.

Kylie Peters from school focused youth service (SFYS), under the auspices of Nillumbik community health service, was first contacted in December 2005. She said 'The initial meetings have taken longer than the actual project!' The SFYS is a statewide initiative funded by the Victorian Department of Education and the Department of Human Services. They jointly fund Kylie and 40 other school focused coordinator positions in Victoria. Kylie's position covers the region of Nillumbik and Banyule.

The aim is community development through grass roots projects rather than having people dictated to from above. The funding for various projects can be between \$100 and \$20,000. She funded eight projects for Nillumbik and Banyule, receiving \$500 for the Eltham library project.

The library project is ideal for SFYS. It involved young people at risk of disconnection from the community and school, aimed at reducing risk taking behaviour and endeavoured to make young people feel better about themselves. Kylie said, 'We were really lucky in the library staff being aware of the boys and wanting to work with them. It is such a small project that will have positive outcomes for the boys.' She loves this project, feeling 'it engages kids where kids are at'.

Once the problem was identified, the resources boiled down, the next question was, what did the boys want?

Connections

The library invited eight boys to a focus group (or 'fish and chip afternoon') in the school holidays. The workers were interested in finding out what the young men wanted to do and to give them ownership over a project to be

held for six sessions on Tuesdays after school from 4 to 5pm. How could the boys continue to use the game and help other users as well?

Jim Nexus has been playing Runescape for a couple of years. He could talk about Runescape all day. He is on level seventy. Hilda and Jocelyn told the boys about the project when the kids were still playing. They could still concentrate on the game while talking to librarians. Jim said 'We have skills that can help us do more than one thing at once'. The librarians were interested in finding out about the game too. Jim has about ten accounts with Runescape, all with different strengths and purposes.

Ideas

The boys came up with the following ideas

- to make a web page about how to play Runescape, now called Crystalscape, including occupational health and safety tips
- to make a guidelines poster for a code of conduct in the library
- a session on communication and conflict resolution
- develop an expert for the day system. The expert is one of the boys, volunteering to help new game users. They would wear a badge to distinguish themselves
- a session on the importance of physical activity, stretching and taking time out.

Together with Liam Bantock from the Salvos, counsellor Jocelyn Courtney (NCHS) facilitated the group every Tuesday after school. She feels the program has been an opportunity to engage with the young people and for them to connect with each other. Even though they all went to Eltham High School, they did not really know each other except through the group. Through their ownership of the project the boys have developed skills, tested their abilities and created a useful resource for other users in the library. Some of these kids were on the outer socially and the project has given them the opportunity to belong to a group.

Facilitator Liam Bantock feels the boys have utilised existing skills but they have learned some new things too, including that library staff are not the enemy. He said

Let's face it, they could have been booted out and had the game banned, but now the young men are expanding their horizons. They have

expertise in the game and they've learned how that can be harnessed. They've learned throwing chairs in the library is not good.

Liam says the skills he brought to the group were knowing what questions to ask, knowing what needed to be done and knowing someone needed to write code. He did not have to teach them, they already had the skills. 'Within the group I suppose I was more trying to encourage them to stay on track.'

They built the web page using Frontpage. The boys all had abilities to do things, to collect information and type it up, bring it back next week to include in the web page. Boys, Liam, and Callam were the main web builders. They have the internet at home but they prefer to come to the library to socialise. Jim Nexus thinks the web page is lame – but he could not have made it by himself. There'll be some more work done on Crystalscape, Jocelyn says, 'to spunk it up a bit.'

The boys were always fairly friendly but they have become a bit more connected as a group over the course of the project. There is some ownership and understanding of reasons for guidelines. Young people have as much right to use the library service as any other person.

Whilst involved in the initial development and establishment of the project as SFYS coordinator, Kylie Peters stepped back once the project actually started. She believes

In terms of what the kids see, they would only see the facilitators; they wouldn't see it as top heavy. Liam Bantock was a key player as he has good group computer skills. Jocelyn also has the engagement skills.

She added 'The kids really respond to Liam, they're fortunate to have him as a male mentor'.

Jocelyn Courtney believes the program has been a very positive thing. The boys, aged between eleven and fourteen, worked together with the library staff to come up with the strategy jointly. They have given useful, mature, responses to a difficult problem. They have been given ownership in their changes in behaviour. The Eltham library has not seen any of the original issues since the program. She believes the library staff have done a fantastic job engaging the young people. 'The librarians haven't come in as authoritarian,' Jocelyn said. 'These librarians are really nice people.'

In May 2006 the mayor of Nillumbik, Greg Johnston, introduced the evening launch of Crystalscape web page and the guidelines posters. The boys were all presented with a laminated certificate and invited to speak to kids at other libraries should a project be adopted anywhere else. A large table of tempting food and drink was attacked, denuded of chocolate biscuits and then the boys left quickly to get back to Runescape.

Jim Nexus was not expecting a certificate and probably will not put it up on his wall. He does not want to nerd up his room any more. He is not a nerd or a computer geek. But he was really pleased to get a membership to Runescape for a month. The project signed up the boys to the game at \$8 each. Jim plays for a minimum of an hour a day, sometimes at the library, sometimes at someone's house. 'The program was pretty good. I learned stretching when I'm on the computers, to do it the right way,' said Jim.

What next? Can the library keep these teenage boys engaged? Can other libraries emulate them?

Hilda Gregory from Eltham library expects the kids will be able to keep playing Runescape, within limits, making sure they cooperate with one another and the library staff. If the

problems return then they will have another meeting with the boys and possibly try a similar project. As far as keeping teenagers engaged with the library, Hilda says, 'The library needs to be aware of their interests and build on those.'

Liam Bantock added that during youth week this year Eltham library held a rock afternoon with a number of different young bands playing (loudly) in the library foyer. He gives them credit. 'The library staff are thinking outside the box and connecting with their community.'

The workers are looking to the Eltham library project to be repeated at other libraries in the Yarra Plenty area. They are constantly looking for ways to connect with young people.

As the Crystalscape ceremony was finishing, librarians scoured the library for hungry kids, trying to get the left over food eaten. Project worker Deb Ruiz-Dove started chatting to a couple of teenage girls, while nibbling at dried fruit and cheese, about their experiences with online bullying, an area of growing concern. 'We're thinking of starting a project for girls in the Diamond Valley library. Would that be useful for you?' 'Oh, yes,' said the teenagers, 'it would'. The girls, the librarian and the project worker began to talk. Engaging where the kids were at – their library.

Victoria Osborne is a freelance writer and performer based in Melbourne. She has had articles published in *Australian puppeteer*, *Educare*, *House and home* and *Inkshed 13*. Currently she is finishing her Professional Writing and Editing Diploma at RMIT. Email vickoz84@yahoo.com.au



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