

Ahead of the Game

How the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) and their partners threw out all the old ideas of what a “youth center” should look like.



¹As Technology Education Librarian at the ImaginOn Library in North Carolina’s Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) system, Kelly Czarnecki inspires creativity and learning through games, computer programming and multimedia production at a unique cultural institution designed and built specifically for children and young adults.

The [PLCMC](#) system consists of 24 library locations that serve approximately 850,000 residents. The system has a main library, six regional libraries, 16 community neighborhood libraries, and ImaginOn, a facility in Charlotte for children and young people.

In the Beginning: Collaboration and Creativity

The idea for [ImaginOn](#) came about in 1997, when the former Executive Director of the PLCMC and the Executive Director of Children’s Theater of Charlotte (CTC) put their minds together. They found that both of their organizations were in dire need of space, and they both shared a common desire to bring stories to life. ImaginOn was born from this common understanding and need, and first opened its doors to the public in 2005. According to its website, ImaginOn lets young people “learn in many ways, through all five senses, ‘from the page to the stage.’ It is the launching pad for remarkable journeys and endless possibilities.”

The founders of ImaginOn didn’t pay much attention to the traditional boundaries between different types of cultural institutions, different modes of learning and different technologies. It houses the Spangler Library, full of books, CD’s, DVD’s and software for children from birth through fifth grade. A Children’s Theater staffed by theater

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Case study: Ahead of the Game

professionals and educators produces plays on a regular basis and offers classes for students ranging in from preschool to high school.

ImaginOn also contains a space for teens known as the [Library Loft](#), which has a collection of circulating theater scripts, graphic novels, manga, fiction/nonfiction, CDs, DVDs, computers with graphic design software, and laptop checkout. Finally, Time Warner Cable Tech Central (Tech Central) has over 30 PCs, 4 Macs, a computer classroom, impromptu technology demonstrations, a multimedia production studio, an animation studio and a foam-walled sound booth.

As Technology Education Librarian of ImaginOn, Kelly works in the Tech Central Department, where she conducts a variety of programs throughout the year that focus primarily on gaming, virtual worlds, Internet use and online safety. In addition, she offers programs for parents and does community outreach. Other Tech Central team members offer their expertise in technology topics such as using PhotoShop, editing movies, and developing classes for homeschoolers. Kelly also advocates for young people and their technology needs on the various internal and professional committees she serves on."

Game Plan

Tech Central provides an open gaming area for teens in which young people can sign up for online gaming and console gaming. Available consoles include the Sony PlayStation (PS2 and PS3), Nintendo Wii and Nintendo DSs. Youth can check out the Nintendo DS, along with the DS games, and play anywhere they like within the library. Games such as Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) are usually played on the television in the gaming room. For LAN gaming, patrons can use

[Alienware](#) laptops checked out from the Main Library, which were provided through an LSTA (Library Services and Technology Act) grant. The Children's Department for patrons under twelve also offers monthly gaming events, which feature the Wii, board games, and selected PC games.



The PS3 and the Wii are the most popular gaming consoles. Kelly feels that the Wii's popularity is due, in part, to the fact that multiple controllers mean that more teens can play a game at once and that many of the games were designed with young audiences in mind. In addition, she says that if an adult plays with a group of kids, they are more likely to use the Wii because the learning curve is not as steep as that of other platforms.

Case study: Ahead of the Game

Patrons sign up for thirty-minute time slots in the open-play gaming area, and they can sign up for multiple slots if no one else is waiting. Kelly says staff have not had many problems enforcing time limits. She adds, "It almost just runs itself. They know the rules and they encourage other kids [about how to play], so it's not been a big deal. Even when it's not their turn, they're willing to just sit there and help the next person, even though of course they want to be playing."

Kelly has also seen what she refers to as "crossover," or youth who come in for gaming who then show an interest in reading and other library programs. For example, while one teen waited his turn during a gaming tournament, he asked Kelly how he could sign up for summer reading.

All Together Now: Game Nights and Tournaments

Teens and their families can play computer and board games together at ImaginOn's family game nights. In 2006, library system received a grant from the State Library of North Carolina's Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) that funded what Kelly describes as "huge collection" of board games. The grant also funded the Alienware laptops and a variety of P.C. games, and amounted to \$69,000 in all.

In 2008, the facility held a summer championship in which teens from sixteen libraries competed in Super Smash Brothers Brawl in the Children's Theater. Teens were delighted that the game was projected onto the large theater screen so that other teens and families could watch the contestants play. Staff solicit feedback and input about games and future tournaments through informal conversations with teens. Kelly shares, "We're always asking them and always encouraging other branches to ask as well: 'What do your teens want for next year's tournament?'; 'What do they want to do?'; and 'How do they want the tournament to be different?' So we do include them in having a voice in how we can do things better or differently, or what games they want."

Making a Game of Learning

Kelly says she always tries to look for activities that "go beyond sitting in front of the screen." She says that while gaming is entertaining and creates community, she wants to inspire teens and kids to try different things that they "hadn't thought of, or thought the library could[n't] offer." For example, she offers game design classes on a variety of software such as Multimedia Fusion, Scratch, and Game Maker. [Scratch](#), a freeware program produced by MIT, is described by its website as "a new programming language that makes it easy to create your own interactive stories, animations, games, music, and art - and share your creations on the web." PLCMC, Hennepin County Library and other library systems are participating in an IMLS grant that encourages innovative uses of Scratch as a 21st Century learning tool. [Game Maker](#) is another freeware

Case study: Ahead of the Game

program that “allows [users] to make exciting computer games, without the need to write a single line of code.” Multimedia Fusion, created by Youth Digital Arts Cyber School (YDACS), is a game design program that retails for about \$80. Kelly explains that young people are interested, but parents are also enthusiastic about the idea and encourage their children to sign up for the classes.

Kelly also teaches teens how to do [Machinima](#), or film making within the virtual environment of a video game. According to [one Web site](#), Machinima “combines aspects of film making, animation and game design to transform an interactive medium (i.e., the video game) into a production studio complete with sets, props, special effects and virtual actors – and all you need is a game and a desktop computer.” In other words, users produce movies with the tools (e.g., camera angle, demo recording, level and script editor) and resources (e.g., characters, backgrounds, levels) available in a game. Teens can add voiceovers to the scenes to make the movie their own.

Kelly says she has learned a great deal from teaching the classes on game design software, including the fact that teens learn in a variety of ways. She says that some students learn by using the tutorials, but others “don’t want to have anything to do with it and want to go and play with the software.” For these latter students, she gives them a few pointers “about how to mess with the program.” She also shows them “the examples of the games that are created by other kids using the software so they can get inspired and realize there really is an end goal to this.” She has also learned that having teens work in groups often turns out to be the most effective, natural way of teaching, since they help each other out in much the same way they do when playing games.

Staying Ahead of the Game

Kelly stays informed about new developments in the gaming world by collecting feedback and advice from the teen patrons themselves. She also follows and contributes to blogs and forums such as the [LibGaming Google Group](#) and the [ALA gaming blog](#). She reads magazines such as [Wired](#) and writes a monthly column, called “The Gaming Life”, for School Library Journal. She also discusses current trends with fellow gamers, fellow librarians, and fellow librarian-gamers. . Kelly wants other branches to be able to do what her site does, and “make it a viable program for those that might not have the same equipment, resources, and knowledge that we do.”

One of the Coolest Games in Town

Word about the ImaginOn facility has spread, and as such, the site now hosts of field trips and tours on a regular basis. The American Library Association (ALA) launched an innovative project to track and measure the impact of gaming on

literacy skills and build a model for library gaming that can be deployed nationally. The Verizon Foundation provided a \$1 million grant for the project. In 2008, the PLCMC system was one of the partner libraries that received the ALA Verizon grant. Kelly, who was chosen to be the library's representative, says that although there was one negative local newspaper story in 2006 that questioned why PLCMC offered gaming, the majority of the feedback has "been really, really positive."

Teen Tech Week

Teen Tech Week is a national initiative sponsored by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) that is aimed at teens, their parents, educators and other concerned adults. According to the [ALA Web site](#), the initiative aims "to ensure that teens are competent and ethical users of technologies, especially those that are offered through libraries such as DVDs, databases, audio books, and video games. Teen Tech Week encourages teens to use libraries' non-print resources for education and recreation, and to recognize that librarians are qualified, trusted professionals in the field of information technology."

Kelly has been head of the Teen Tech Week team at PLCMC for two years, and one of her priorities is to get every branch to participate in Teen Tech Week in some manner, even if it is as simple as a display of audio books or another modest way that showcases the technology that each location has to offer. She also wants to support the branches in this endeavor and help them make the connection between technology, literacy and learning to the members of their community.

In March 2008, ImaginOn participated in the event at the Freedom Regional branch, which is connected to a local technology school. Kelly explains that the branch that hosted the event was very supportive of and excited about the fact that ImaginOn would be participating, because they knew that their presence would mean it would be "a huge deal."

D.I.Y. Movies and Music

ImaginOn's facility hosts a multi-media production studio that allows young people to make movies and create music. According to Kelly, "youth, teens, and families can come in and can create their own [work]. The equipment is free [to use] and they can walk away with a DVD or a CD of what they made. The experience is fun and educational and encourages people to return with their friends and family."

The sound booth is a recent addition because, as Kelly explains, "We find the kids like to make music more than they do movies." The booth not only offers privacy and sound insulation, but it also provides better quality sound output.

The booth was purchased in part with funding from the Collaborative Summer Library Program ([CSLP](#)). Kelly says the music creation with GarageBand and ACID, and the option to make videos, have been some of the most popular programs offered at the facility.

A Second Life

Kelly also provides young people with access to Teen Second Life, an online virtual world imagined and created by its “residents.” PLCMC’s “in world” [blog](#) notes “the teen grid is a great place to explore and meet new people.” Patrons who are 13 or older can check out a flash drive from the Tech Central desk and use it to log into their Second Life account. Patrons must have a cell phone or a PayPal account to sign up for basic accounts. Kelly explains she can sign teens without a cell phone up for a more limited account. Teens can also pay library fines through Second Life using the in-world fine paying machine. Even better, they can pay off their fines by attending library programs within Teen Second Life as part of a program called “Project Payoff”.

PLCMC has recently hosted several in-world author presentations. The authors simply log on to Teen Second Life from home, navigate their avatars to PLCMC’s island, and interact with young people from PLCMC. Every week, [ImaginOn](#) hosts meetings and activities related to the [Science Friday Program](#). Science Friday is sponsored by NPR (National Public Radio) and facilitated by NASA scientists. Young people listen to the audio stream and subsequently do an activity or discuss the topic they just listened to. [ImaginOn](#) also hosted a college fair in Teen Second Life last fall, during which college representatives offered teens a chance to interact with and ask questions about the college in an avatar forum.

Kelly feels fortunate to be able to offer Second Life at [ImaginOn](#), but admits the “requirements of having to install it and the systems requirements necessary to run it can make it difficult for some libraries.” She mentions that other browser-based 3D virtual worlds have been more accessible to libraries, such as Whyville, Club Penguin, Gaia Online and [SmallWorlds](#).

Community Outreach

In addition to all of her work at [ImaginOn](#), Kelly provides outreach at the county jail, where she does gaming with 16- and 17-year-old males. She brings in gaming consoles, and also works with the teens on blogging, podcasting, and filmmaking. Kelly is enthusiastic and positive about the work, stating that the teens “rise to the occasion. They know that they have to get along and help each other - and it’s really cool to see.” Kelly shares the story of a teen who visited [ImaginOn](#) after his release from jail. She adds, “We’re always talking up this place. And they come here and they want to check it out. And I think we’ve made a connection.”

Case study: Ahead of the Game

With a space like ImaginOn and staff like Kelly, it seems everyone has an opportunity to connect.