



Center for the Future of Museums

COVID-19 Scenario Three: Lock Down

This scenario explores how the (fictional) Seattle Gaming Museum navigated the COVID-19 crisis in the context of the state and city response to the unfolding pandemic. This scenario is a starting point for exploring how a museum might deal with the widespread closure of public facilities and staff exposure to COVID-19.

Seattle experienced one of the earliest COVID-19 outbreaks of 2020. Their first case was confirmed on January 21, the first two deaths occurred on February 26, and by March 10 the official case count in King County stood at 120, with 22 deaths. On March 3, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan declared a state of civil emergency and one week later the state of Washington instituted a ban on “social, spiritual, and recreational gatherings” of 250 people or more in three counties encompassing the Seattle area for at least the month of March. On March 12, Gov. Jay Inslee on Thursday ordered all public and private K-12 schools in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties to close for six weeks.

By late March, the director and board of the Seattle Gaming Museum (SGM) knew they had a crisis on their hands. Their primary visitors were students from the nearby University of Washington and two local high schools, together with the tenants of an adjacent coworking space. The museum had developed a quirky business model around those audiences. Visitors were invited to pay a voluntary admission fee to the galleries, which profiled a stunning collection of both tabletop and digital games with an emphasis on strategy and role-playing, and charged a small fee to join any of several games being held at the museum at any given time. (The museum’s monthly all-access gaming pass was extremely popular.) Twenty percent of revenue came from the museum store, which sold a wide selection of gaming supplies and associated fiction. The museum also provided space for over two dozen local gaming clubs, and many of the club members became members and donors.

As COVID-19 closures and response rolled out, the university and the local schools closed and most of the clubs told the museum they would suspend their game nights indefinitely. Attendance and shop sales fell by 80 percent. Then, on March 20, a tenant of the neighboring coworking space was diagnosed with COVID-19. As this person and their coworkers were frequent visitors to SGM, museum staff realized they had been exposed to the coronavirus, and went into voluntary quarantine. The board of directors closed the museum galleries indefinitely and engaged a commercial firm to do a deep clean of the building.

Using Scenarios to Plan Your Museum’s COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Response
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As is true of many nonprofits, SGM had very little in the way of financial reserves. The board treasurer reported the museum had enough cash on hand to meet payroll, rent, and other financial obligations for about two weeks, absent new income. The director (a retiree from a local tech company) offered to forgo his salary for the duration of the crisis, diverting those funds to support the museum's one full-time and two half-time staff for as long as possible while they were in quarantine.

Staff, in turn, worked from home to launch an online crowdfunding campaign, tied to an online game created in collaboration with two games designers on the museum's board. "Conquer COVID" challenged players around the world to respond to COVID-19 in productive ways and alleviated the stress of social isolation caused by widespread quarantine. In April, the museum received a grant from the Neighborhood Small Relief Fund, which was established by Amazon to provide cash grants to small Seattle businesses in need during the novel coronavirus outbreak. This enabled the museum to maintain rent payments and salaries until they reopened.