Chapter 2

The Gaming Generation

The Impact of Games & Gamers

When we examine traditionally underserved populations in libraries, near, if not at, the top of the list are teenage males. It's not that librarians don't try, but we do not connect with them, or seem to be able to consistently provide services they value, in ways we do with other groups (parents, seniors, business owners, or others). Through story-time programs, collection development, arts and crafts, lap-sit programs, and homework support, we do a good job of serving the needs of younger children, and we do a good job of serving patrons when they reach parenthood (again with story-time programs, collection development, lap-sit programs, homework support, and lifelong-learning programmatic elements). And we also know how to serve seniors fairly well with collection development, program offerings, and lifelong-learning elements.

The group that libraries seem to lose is the teenagers—specifically the boys. As librarians, we then have to hope they will come back as parents, business owners, lifelong learners, or seniors. But what connections and relationships have we built with them to support that hope?

As you will see in this report's case studies, gaming offers libraries an excellent opportunity to reach these users—which is a good thing because there are *a lot* of them. Taken as a whole, both male and female, the gaming generation represents some ninety million people, up to about the age of thirty-five. Around that age, we start to see very definitive drop-off levels in game playing and of knowledge about video games.

That "ninety million" figure is particularly significant, because it represents a generation larger than the baby boomers. All we need to do is think about the impact the seventy-seven million boomers had on society to realize that a group that is ten million stronger will surely be a similarly significant force. The far end of the age spectrum of gamers has now been in the workforce for a few years, and as Beck and Wade note in *Got Game*, they are already having an impact. For the most part, they share specific characteristics that define them as a generation and also mark them as very different from other demographic groups.

In order to determine these characteristics and understand how they might affect the business world as ninety-million people enter it in waves, Beck and Wade commissioned a survey of 2,500 men and women in the United States in order to determine "*whether the experience of gaming and growing up surrounded by games, changes attitudes, expectations, and abilities related to business*. And the answer is a resounding yes."[1] Based on their research, they offer the following lessons gamers learn as they grow up playing games:

The Individual's Role

- *You're the star.* You are the center of attention of every game, unlike, say, Little League, where most kids will never be the star.
- *You're the boss.* The world is very responsive to you. . . .
- *You're the customer, and the customer is always right.* Like shopping, the whole experience is designed for your satisfaction and entertainment; the opponents are tough, but never too tough.
- *You're an expert.* You have the experience of getting really, really good . . . early and often.
- *You're a tough guy.* You can experience all sorts of crashes, suffering, and death—and it doesn't hurt.

How the World Works

- *There's always an answer*. You might be frustrated for a while, you might even never find it, but you know it's there.
- *Everything is possible.* You see yourself or other players consistently do amazing things. . . .
- *The world is a logical, human-friendly place*. Games are basically fair. Events may be random but not inexplicable. . . .
- *Trial-and-error is almost always the best plan*. It's the only way to advance in most games, even if you ultimately break down and buy a strategy guide or copy others on the really hard parts.
- *Things are (unrealistically) simple. . . . You can figure a game out, completely.* Try that with real life.

How People Relate

- *It's all about competition*. You're always competing; even if you collaborate with other human players, you are competing against some character or score.
- *Relationships are structured. . . .*
- *We are all alone.* The gaming experience is basically solitary, even if played in groups. . . .
- *Young people rule. . . .* Paying your dues takes a short time, youth actually helps, and there is no attention paid to elders.
- *People are simple*. Their skills may be complex, multidimensional, and user-configurable, but their personality types and behaviors are simple. . . .

What You Should Do

- *Rebel*. Edginess and attitude are dominant elements of the culture.
- *Be a hero*. You always get the star's role; that is the only way to succeed or get satisfaction.
- *Bond with people who share your game experience, not your national or cultural background. . . .*
- *Make your own way in the world*. Leaders are irrelevant and often evil; ignore them.
- *Tune out and have fun. . . .* When reality is boring, you hop into game world. When a game gets boring, you switch to one that isn't.[2]

As you read through these lessons, did you think to yourself, "How different they are from what I learned growing up." Do they feel strange and make you wonder what individuals in this generation will be like—that perhaps they will be selfish, self-centered, and lazy? These are common perceptions of gamers because, as I noted earlier, it *looks* like they are wasting time staring at screens, playing games, in what appears to be a very solitary activity.

If this is how you felt reading Beck and Wade's lessons, you are most likely older than thirty-five (this is indeed a stereotype, but it plays out more often than not—try this exercise with others of different ages to conduct your own survey).

Not surprisingly, the self-centered trait is indeed prominent among gamers, but they are not necessarily selfish, and they are most definitely not lazy. As Beck and Wade analyzed the results of their survey, they identified specific characteristics—based on growing up with these lessons—that gamers exhibit:

- If you get there first, you win.
- There's a limited set of tools, and it is certain that *some* combination will work. If you choose the right combination, the game will reward you.
- Trial-and-error is the best strategy and the fastest way to learn.
- Elders and their received wisdom can't help; they don't understand even the basics of this new world.
- You will confront surprises and difficulties that you are not prepared for. But the sum of those risks and dangers, by definition, cannot make the quest foolish.
- Once you collect the right "objects" (business plan, prototype, customers, maybe even profits) you'll get an infusion of gold to tide you over.
- While there may be momentary setbacks, overall the trend will be up.[3]

Again, read through this list of characteristics and ask yourself how many of them feel intuitive and natural to you. Most of them run counterintuitive to what past generations have believed, which can understandably cause misunderstandings and conflict.

I learned about this firsthand in 2005 when my family and I were on vacation with another family. The father of the other family, a baby boomer, worked in the technology department at a school district and was in charge of a staff of mostly college-age and twenty-something employees. One evening during our trip, he explained to me that he was frustrated working with these employees because they wouldn't do what he told them to do. He felt they tended to go off in directions other than where he wanted them to go; he did concede, however, the work, eventually, was done. During a few conversations we had, he repeated, "I just don't understand them. Why aren't they doing what they're supposed to?"

I happened to be reading *Got Game* at the time, so I offered to let him borrow it for the rest of the trip. The next night, he was about a hundred pages into it, and he was very much excited about the book. He seemed much more optimistic. "Now I get it," he said, and then explained to me that what he had mistaken for laziness and procrastination was actually just the way gamers work. Being a gamer too, he immediately recognized the points Beck and Wade had made in their work, and he was able to relate them to his situation.

His revelation was articulated something like this: "They're not avoiding work, like I thought they were. I've been giving them problems to solve, and instead of assuming there is one right answer and only one path to reaching it, they've been experimenting with different possible answers in order to find the best one. Then, and only then, are they acting to make a decision and 'finish the quest.' In my world, if the problem doesn't get solved immediately, people get fired. But in their world, they're starting the game over until they succeed. Now I get it, and I'll know how to better handle the situation."

This is just one example that illustrates how perceptions of the gaming generation, like perceptions of gaming in general, tend only to scratch the surface. All of these characteristics have similar implications for learning, specifically for libraries.

Meet the Gamers

In an April 2005 article in *Library Journal*, Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler (University of Wisconsin–Madison) invited librarians to "Meet the Gamers," in order to encourage thinking about how librarians and libraries could better serve this generation. They further narrowed Gee's and others' observations about gamer behavior to focus on those behaviors most relevant for librarians. In this seminal article, they proposed a set of characteristics distinctly at odds with traditional library service.

> Game cultures feature participation in a collective intelligence, blur the distinction between the production and consumption of information, emphasize expertise rather than status, and promote international and cross-cultural media and communities. Most of these characteristics are foreign, or run counter print-era institutions such as libraries. At the same time, game cultures promote various types of information literacy, develop information seeking habits and production practices (like writing), and require good, old-fashioned research skills, albeit using a wide spectrum of content. In short, librarians can't afford to ignore gamers.[4]

In "Meet the Gamers," Squire and Steinkuehler highlight a few popular gaming icons and games that players encounter. Using *Lineage*—a game the authors describe as "a massive, multiplayer online game where thousands of players interact in real time through avatars . . . "—as an example of what gamers learn and the skills they practice during play, Squire and Steinkuehler report that playing *Lineage* actually involves a lot of research, creation of resources (such as maps), an understanding of currencies and financial transactions, and a lot of writing among other things.

> Research is a core component of game play. Gamers find and interpret data to determine where the best hunting is, for example. They also publish results through game forums (official sources) and clan forums (unofficial sources) and build spreadsheet models to compare the effectiveness of strategies.

Constance Steinkuehler, from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, presenting at the 2005 Gaming in Libraries Symposium (December 5, 2005, Chicago, Illinois).

The idea that people would enjoy researching information, studying maps, scouring Web sites for tips and tricks, and writing lengthy "walkthroughs" as pleasure probably seems a bit strange to some—but then, to others, so might a leisurely afternoon spent reading Proust or exploring a library. But these activities are standard for gamers. Knowing where and how to find the right information

isn't just entertainment, it's also a source of prestige.[5]

Making a similar argument in *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Johnson points out how playing *SimCity* can teach children the basics of economics and urban planning. He wonders, "Why does a seven-year-old soak up the intricacies of industrial economics in game form, when the same subject would send him screaming for the exits in a classroom?"[6]

"Meet the Gamers," by Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler
www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA516033.html

Examining these two games in the context of library services highlights powerful implications for future library services.

Squire and Steinkuehler list the following starting points librarians can use to begin this discussion:

> How can librarians respond to this gamer world? One option is to develop a deeper understanding of emergent digital literacies and find ways to put library cultures into conversation with gaming cultures. . . .
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> First would be to carry games in libraries. . . .
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> Second, libraries might set up workstations with games or host gaming nights. . . .
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> Imagine starting a *Civilization* club at a local library, where players are encouraged to play through historical scenarios or to compete in tournaments via the multiplayer expansion pack. . . .
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> As the Nintendo generation turns 30, adults—not just children—will demand access to information in the ways and with the tools they already use and like. . . .
>
> Librarians must find creative ways to support people in forming sites of collective intelligence, searching information, working within social networks, and producing knowledge. If not, they run the risk of rendering themselves, for much of the public at least, largely obsolete.[7]

Clearly, we, as librarians, have our work cut out for us—if we are to change our traditional beliefs and mental models about how our users should learn and use information *as well as* our patrons' perceptions of how we can connect them with that information.

In the case studies in this issue, I will highlight libraries and librarians that have already started doing some of the things Squire and Steinkuehler suggest, and you will read about the successes they have had. I've also already mentioned the service libraries can provide by collecting, cataloging, and circulating video games.

Reaching Out . . . and into the Future

To return to the original question about why libraries should care about one of the most common experiences—shared by ninety million Americans, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic standing—a place for librarians to start is to examine and pose questions about content and services libraries offer for teenagers in particular. The most obvious reason to care is that if the library institution continues to lose the hearts and minds of teenagers, librarians face an uncertain task when we will try to reach out to them in the future—to ask for increases in funding, for support for library services, or depend on them to lead the world. As children progress from school libraries to public libraries to academic libraries to special libraries and back to public libraries, how can we, as a profession, instill and maintain their connections with the library institution?

Truly, the answer affects us all, and gaming is quite possibly the easiest and most persuasive place for us to begin. Although our profession is just now starting to discuss some of the more fantastic ideas proposed in "Meet the Gamers," any size library could begin offering open-play gaming as soon as tomorrow. As grandiose as this statement sounds, hopefully you will be convinced that it's true after reading this issue of *Library Technology Reports*. By simply offering space—even limited space on a Friday night after the library closes—where users can set up their own gaming equipment to play with and against each other, libraries can immediately begin changing the image from one of books and shushing to fun and play.

Incidentally, one of the benefits of offering gaming services—either open play or structured tournaments—is that the same setup (indeed, even the same games) can be used with other demographic groups. Once a library has implemented gaming for teenagers—such as with the games *Dance Dance Revolution* or *Mario Kart*—librarians can modify the program to offer the same game services to younger children, generation X adults, or even families. And with just a few minor changes, that is, using different types of games (poker, fishing, World War II games, puzzle games), libraries can also offer "gaming" to older users. This type of extension of services only serves to highlight how far librarians can reach by adding gaming to the library's repertoire of services.

Although offering gaming within the library may sound like an attempt to throw a modern technology at users—in an attempt to get them through the door, so we can then teach them and give them books to check out—there is historical precedence for gaming-like services.

In 1982, Irene Wood Bell and Robert B. Brown published their book, *Gaming in the Media Center Made Easy*. While this was the age of Atari and the beginning of the Nintendo revolution, the authors stick with the analog environment and present ninety-eight games that can be used by school librarians to teach information literacy and other valuable skills. It includes, "card games, dice games, puzzles, hands-on games, location games, and identification games" with game titles such as: *Where Am I? What Am I?*; *Unauthorized Authors*; *Card Catalog Flip*; *Titles Terrific*; *Dewey Dice*; *Dewey Tells No Lies*; *Dewey, May I???; Dewey's Dance*; *Trekking around the World with Dewey*; *Dewey in a Muddle*; *Reference Riddle*; *Reference Roulette*; *Guesses in the Dark*; *Atlas Attack*; *Remember the Web* (long before the Internet came to schools!); and *AV-ID*.[8] In the foreword, the authors explain why these games are beneficial for students.

> The elements of competitions and cooperation have been found to be very effective in transmitting and reinforcing skills, and, for this reason, games are structured so that winners (teams or individuals) can emerge, which always adds an air of interest for students. (Media specialists or teachers can decide whether or not actual prizes will be awarded, and some may wish to use points to help determine grades.). . . .
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> . . . careful and thoughtful use of *Gaming in the Media Center Made Easy* will allow the media specialist or teacher to structure a program of activities that presents students with the opportunity to learn. The only surprise may be how quickly and enthusiastically they do so.[9]

Finally, librarians need to heed the same warnings Beck and Wade give managers and business owners in *Got Game*. "Firms that 'get' games will unlock assets at every level of their workforces. Firms that don't will wonder where all their best employees went."[10]

The most likely scenario—one that many of us are already seeing happen—is that nongamers will be managing gamers, so understanding them and their attitudes will be critically important for department heads, supervisors, and directors of libraries. As noted earlier in the example of the baby boomer in charge of college-age and twenty-something employees, this means recognizing their work patterns and adjusting our interactions and expectations accordingly in order to take full advantage of their talents and ideas.

Even language becomes important when dealing with such a generation gap as the one that exists between gamers and nongamers. For example, nongamers likely do not realize the villain gamers must defeat, before reaching the end of each level, is generically referred to as "the boss." I found this out one day when discussing my boss with my son. I talked about how frustrated I was at something my boss did, and he responded by telling me about defeating "the boss" and advancing in the game. Initially, I thought the name of the character he defeated was "The Boss," like the Green Goblin or Dr. Octopus in the Spider-Man comic books. But several days later, after hearing him refer to defeating "the boss," I finally asked, "I thought you defeated him days ago and moved on?" After much confusion, I finally learned that my son was simply using this term to refer to multiple "enemies" (or obstacles in the game).

So if you are a supervisor in a library, managing an employee who is part of the gaming generation, the last thing you want to call yourself is "the boss." To gamers, the boss is the person they have to defeat in order to succeed and move forward, and they have an inherent distrust of them.

Instead, John Beck (in his presentations) has encouraged supervisors to portray themselves as "strategy guides," because these are the resources gamers turn to when they need help. These are books (reading!) that gamers refer to when they get stuck in a game. The guides are information resources that answer questions and offer help, tips, and outright cheats for advancing within the game—they sound very much like the services librarians provide, don't they? If supervisors can position themselves as information resources for their employees—indeed, if librarians could position themselves this way for the gaming generation—perhaps we could finally move beyond the perceptions of us as just "bosses" and "books."

Other ways to harness the creativity, ambitions, and engagement styles of gamers include:

- valuing their ideas and letting them contribute early on;
- rewarding them for their achievements;
- letting them customize their work environments and even their jobs; and
- allowing them multiple paths to perform their duties, giving them the room to fail, and knowing, ultimately, they will learn from that failure and succeed.

Not only can other generations learn how to better manage gamers, but they can learn a lot from gamers' attitudes, too.

Talking Points

- The gaming generation (ninety million people) is larger than the baby boomers (seventy-seven million people) and will have an even bigger impact on society (and therefore on libraries).
- Gamers approach the world, education, and work differently than past generations. They are more prone to taking risks, believe in trial and error, and are willing to fail in order to succeed; they believe themselves to be experts but are also very willing to seek out help; desire to collaborate and be team players; are experiential learners (rather than being text-based learners like many librarians); possess strong organizational and strategizing skills; are creative problem solvers; and constantly seek to be challenged.
- Don't refer to yourself as their "boss"! Instead, set yourself up as a "strategy guide" that they can turn to when they need help with a project or a problem.

Notes

1. John Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How a New Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).
2. Ibid., 11–14.
3. Ibid., 43–44.
4. Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler, "Meet the Gamers," *Library Journal* (April 15, 2005), www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA516033.html (accessed August 22, 2006).
5. Ibid.
6. Steve Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 32.
7. Squire and Steinkuehler, "Meet the Gamers."
8. Irene Wood Bell and Robert B. Brown, *Gaming in the Media Center Made Easy* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982), 15.
9. Ibid., 15–16.
10. Beck and Wade, *Got Game,* 45.