# A Powerful Draw Beyond Youth Culture

### Abstract

*While research (and previous "Gaming and Libraries" issues of* LTR*) has documented how to serve both very young and older patrons, there is still another underserved group we could reach by offering targeted gaming programs—people in their twenties and thirties. Gaming isn't just for kids anymore, and the average age of today's gamer is thirty-five. Libraries can reach out to twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, a traditionally underserved audience itself, using a variety of gaming programs. This chapter of "Gaming in Libraries: Learning Lessons from the Intersections" explores how a library in suburban Chicago made itself much more attractive to this age group through a gaming program.*

The final sentence in the CERG paper urges researchers to study the civic influence of videogames "so that we can better understand and help guide engagement with this powerful force in youth culture."[1] While true, this statement fails to take into account the fact that the average videogame player is now thirty-five years old and has been playing videogames for thirteen years.[2] In addition, libraries have seen great success providing videogame programs for seniors (see Allan M. Kleiman's case study in my previous *LTR*),[3] and family gaming events are becoming more common. Yet there is still another underserved group we could reach by offering targeted gaming programs—people in their twenties and thirties.

## Case Study 3

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In March of 2007, the three of us began to discuss how to encourage more people in their twenties and thirties to use the Oak Park Public Library and its resources. Like many libraries, we had a tendency to lose users after their teen years and not get them back again until they had children of their own. We also live in a community that is very family friendly, but doesn't have a lot going on for singles or couples who might like the occasional activity without their children. We wanted to offer something they could do in their own community that was tailored to their tastes and interests. In September 2007, we named the group "Genre X" and started with a blog and a monthly book discussion group held at a local bar.

After our monthly book discussion became a hit, we were looking for new ways to expand services to this group. We've had a lot of success with our Wii tournaments with teens, and we thought it might be fun to bring our tournaments to a new demographic. So for ALA's National Gaming Day in November 2008, we decided to stretch ourselves outside of our comfortable gaming tournament mode and do something a little different.

Our first program, Hi/Lo Tech Night, was our first after-hours Genre X event. It was envisioned as a marriage of video and board gaming, with tournaments for both in

**Figure 4**
Gamers at Oak Park Public Library's Hi/Lo Tech Night for National Gaming Day @ Your Library (November 15, 2008).

separate rooms. We also had local DJs (two staff members and a volunteer) playing 45-minute sets in the art gallery that connects the "hi" and "lo" tech rooms. A Scrabble tournament was held in the Lo Tech room, and we also had other games (brought in by staff members) for people to play. In the Hi Tech room, we had six Wiis set up for a *Mario Kart* tournament, with *Guitar Hero* and *Big Brain Academy* set up at different stations. Outside of the tournaments (which lasted about an hour each), most of the night was spent in free play and mingling.

Our first Hi/Lo tournament involved a significant food budget (about $200), gift cards for the first-, second-, and third-place winners of both tournaments ($120 total), iTunes gift cards as a thank-you to our three DJs ($75), $100 for promotional design and supplies, and staff time from four staff members for four hours each to run the event plus prep time. We used eight Wii consoles, but a library could have just as much fun with one brought from home if the library provided food and a fun atmosphere. Don't be afraid to ask for donations, especially for food and other sundries that may bring your cost down.

The gaming night was such a success that we organized a second after-hours Genre X event, Hop on Pop, on Saturday, March 16, 2009. We wanted to create a large-scale trivia event, part Pub Quiz and part Great American Pop Culture Championship. The moderator, Parilac, and

Harris wrote a two-and-a-half hour ultimate quiz, which we presented in multimedia format with slides. People played in teams of two and three, and we had gift certificates and gag trophies for the winner. We also gave out trophies for the team with the best name and for the team with the lowest score. There was time to socialize before and after the event, as well as between rounds while we were doing the scoring.

For Hop on Pop trivia, we budgeted about $50 for promotional design, $150 in prizes, $125 in food, and staff time from four staff members for four hours plus prep and planning. We also spent a great deal of time writing and producing the actual quiz, a lot of which was done on our own time. If you're intimidated at the many hours it took us to write and craft our trivia quiz (twenty-plus hours, mostly unpaid), think about just using *Trivial Pursuit* questions or seeking out prepackaged trivia online. Don't get too hung up on rules and policies if your library will allow for that. Our events have both been pretty low key and low pressure, and people had a lot of fun that way.

Administration has been very supportive of these events, and especially supportive of getting this age group to use the library regularly. They've supported us financially by providing security at each event, and they've been very interested in checking out what we're doing and letting our board know what we're up to.

We've tried to create a unique brand for Genre X that involves having a unique aesthetic identity. For both events, a member of the Genre X group volunteered her time to design a screenprinted poster that we could use to promote the event, similar to those for rock shows. Those posters got a good deal of attention and looked very different from other library promotional material.

We also advertised in local free papers and event guides, as well as local blogs. Hi/Lo made it onto the Chicago Reader Free Shit blog, which brought in a lot of the attendees the first time around. We also used Facebook for Hop on Pop to invite fans of our library and get them interested in the program.

*Chicago Reader Free Shit blog*
http://blogs.chicagoreader.com/freeshit

We were mostly hoping to have an event for in-person social networking based around an activity that our demographic was already using. In both cases, gaming fit the bill for us, and both were very well attended (sixty-plus people each). Our core group of monthly book discussions at a local bar continues to grow, but we've found it interesting that our after-hours events attract an almost entirely different crowd than comes to the Genre X book discussions. The group was also less local, with people

coming to play from the city, as well as nearby suburbs. We've had attendees ask for more gaming events, and we think we've also seen a lot of these people come back to the library for materials after we've seen them for programming.

After Hi/Lo, we had a pair of girls in their twenties mention that this was one of the most fun events they'd been to since moving to Oak Park, and they wanted us to profusely thank our board and Friends group for providing the funds. EVERYONE is shocked that these events are free. This is a group that's used to paying for their fun, and it's an easy sell in today's economy.

We consider these events a big success, even considering the cost, because they involve creating a relationship with an entirely different group of library users than we normally see. If we were to duplicate either event, we'd save a good deal of time. It's been wonderful to achieve a genuinely fun event, while still tying in to the library's core mission, and as a result, we're planning to expand our gaming activities in the future.

For example, our Boomer and beyond staff have been begging for a trivia contest of their own, which we think would be spectacularly fun, and we may even use it as a library fundraiser. The trivia night actually required a great deal of time on our part because of the intensive quiz. Next time around we would do fewer rounds (we did eight of about ten questions each), and we would probably have larger teams, which would hopefully save time scoring and allow for more people with seating and tables.

We're also starting Wii Play days for our Active Agers (senior citizen population), and we may revisit Hi/Lo for National Gaming Day 2009, this time incorporating a *Rock Band* tournament. We've also recently been contacted by a local board game developers group that is going to host monthly game nights at the library. We hope this will attract a more diverse crowd, and we're looking forward to seeing what may happen with this.

It's important to understand that gaming appeals to many different age groups and that those people often like to play with people their own age. When we first started doing our teen gaming events, we had a lot of interest from people who weren't eligible to play. Now we're opening up the opportunities for Wii and other kinds of play, and we're finding that it's a great way to bring people in our community together.

Games feel like they're about community, engagement, and curiosity, which go along with a library's mission. We're happy to offer these kinds of events and allow our patrons to connect to us and each other in a new way.

## Lessons Learned

- Gaming isn't just for kids anymore, and the average age of today's gamer is thirty-five. Libraries can reach out to twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, a traditionally underserved audience itself, using a variety of gaming programs.

- Once certain groups find out that one demographic is allowed to game in the library, they often request it for themselves because gaming has become such a pervasive activity in our society.

- Gaming is a great way to bring diverse groups of people in the community together.

- Trivia nights are an easy—and inexpensive—way to offer gaming for adults.

## Notes

1. Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Chris Evans, *The Civic Potential of Video Games* (Oakland, CA: Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College, 2008), 34.
2. Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," www.theesa.com/facts (accessed April 20, 2009).
3. Allan M. Kleiman, "Case Study 5," in Jenny Levine, "Gaming & Libraries Update: Broadening the Intersections," *Library Technology Reports* 44, no. 3 (April 2008): 20–22.