

## Video Games: Attracting the Nex-Gen Patron

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### Abstract:

*This paper addresses the increase in teen patronage and public libraries' ability to retain them as life-long library users. Librarians, as they do with different forms of programming and engagement, can interact with and captivate teens in a more relatable way using video games.*

*This paper will offer the idea that having more interactive gaming time with librarians and teens, libraries can gain and retain these newer, younger patrons, who will begin to look to a variety of other library resources, and in turn pass that value on to future generations.*

*This paper examines interviews with youth librarians, articles of patron behaviour after dedicated gaming spaces were introduced, and the author's observations as Technology Access Manager of the Boston Public Library, responsible for helping build and maintaining these types of rooms.*

**Keywords:** Library Resources, Video Games, Audio Visual, AV, Patrons

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## **I. Background**

The modern-day video game arguably started somewhere between when the Atari 2600 and NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) were release to the world. To summarize the history of video games the article from the *Encyclopedia of Human Development* states:

“The first interactive computer game, Spacewar, was written in 1961 by an MIT student named Steve Russell on a Digital Equipment PDP-1 computer. The first consumer video game, Pong, was released a decade later in 1972. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, most video games were played in arcades...The video game industry is now bigger than Hollywood, raking in more than \$10 billion annually in the United States in 2002 and 2003. As games have taken up more of children's time and become more realistic and engaging, researchers have begun to study children's uses of video games and the varied effects they may have.” - Gentile, D.A. & Anderson, C. A. (2006). Video games. In N.J. Salkind (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Development* (Vol 3, pp. 1303-1307). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Teen patrons today are on the tail end of the Millennial generation and in the throes of the generation Z'ers. They range from 12 years of age to 19 years old. As social media strategist Neville Hobson states in a 2017 post that these teens are “interested in accumulating rewarding experiences... They are competitive and want to be judged on their own merits and talents...they are a DIY generation and feel as though previous generations have complicated the workplace” - Hobson, N. (2017) generation-z-vs-millennials

A public library is a library that is open to the general public and is largely funded by municipal taxes. It is operated by librarians and information professionals of different backgrounds and disciplines.

### **I.A Public Libraries Culture Change**

Today's public library has changed drastically from what most of us have lived through or how it has been depicted in media. It's not the library of “Shhhh” or quiet in nature anymore. Regular patrons range from infants to adults. Parents bring their children to the library introducing them to early literacy programs and the joy of reading. College students use it as a place for collaboration and brainstorming. Businesses start inside these walls. Children look for a place to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It's a venue for budding and established musical bands. It's a destination for weddings and where writers get their first break. It's where radio stations are built (as the WBUR in the Boston Public Library, inaugurated in 2017\*\*). Collections are getting physically smaller and e-bigger. Resources are being digitized and catalogued using metadata. Librarians are being supplemented by online lending services such as Overdrive and Hoopla. The library website is often the first stop for researchers and leisure readers, while the physical library has become the second.

## **I.B The Start of Video games in Libraries**

Libraries have been lending video game titles for years with varying successes. The Oakville Public Library in Ontario, Canada created programs that incorporated games on Commodore PET computers understanding that “playing the games, in addition to being fun, apparently goes some way toward teaching motor skills, coordination, logic, and such” (Nicholson, 2013). John Kenney, Teen Librarian at the Hyde Park Branch of the Boston Public Library, remembers the Boston Public Library introducing game lending in 2010. The St. Louis Library has close to 200 Xbox titles for patrons to checkout. The oldest catalogued game in SLPL was introduced in 2007. (St. Louis public library online catalogue) Overall it is has been a popular service.

Recently the gaming industry has been moving towards downloading and download only games which may hinder the libraries ability to share or lend these resources.

## **I.C The Benefits of Gaming**

Games on the surface incite pleasure for the users. It can put the player in a realm that may seem too far to get to from their physical space and gives the ability to live a life that may not be able to experience from the point of view you currently stand in. Gamers can play a perfect riff from “Stairway to Heaven,” slay mythical creatures, dunk on Lebron James, or fly a Boeing 747 from Boston to Beijing. But a deeper dive, posted by Eugenio S. (2017), suggests that you can improve your hand eye coordination, problem solving skills, enhance your multitasking skills, and the much-debated social skills. While there is a case for the pros and cons, the truth is that the repetitive and constant practice of any activity strengthens your ability to get better at any subsequent activity. What people thought of as mindless button mashing and chaining to the “idiot-box” or television have taught generations of gamers more than we have anticipated.

## **II. Video Games as a Medium for Attracting and Retaining Teen Patrons**

Video games are a common pastime for people aging from 10–65 says the site Statista.com. Focusing on the ages 12–19 years of age for the purposes of the paper, it arguably is the pastime of choice, serving as a beacon for social interaction. When a library offers this service or builds a space for this purpose it is providing teens the means and space to congregate. It also creating a pool of willing patrons to influence. The average teen patron will see this as recreation, but their participation can also benefit the library.

For instance, during the summer reading months, teens coming to play video games may also come to the library to borrow books on their summer reading lists, boosting circulation numbers. Librarians can use this opportunity to educate teens on how to look for books and other materials, how to use cataloguing systems like the Dewey Decimal System and can familiarize teens with the collection put together for them. Librarians are instrumental in this process as they facilitate the correct use of library resources and new behaviors in utilizing services. Librarians are also responsible for creating an environment conducive to patron retention like governing bodies, generation specific rules (e.g. eating in gaming spaces), classes and programs, competitive opportunities, and the necessary facilities.

Whether you are a teen or an adult we all decide to come back to an establishment because of the positive experiences. Hopefully, teens will remember what they’ve learned, the friends they’ve made, and the ideas they created while using the library. As teens get older they will ultimately create and strengthen the association and continue to use the library as a resource and then pass on the recommendation to their own children.

“Younger Americans” priorities for libraries reflect this mix of habits, including various types of brick-and-mortar services as well as digital technologies. Asked about what it is “[very important](#)” libraries should offer, for instance, librarians were at the top of the list ( *Pewternet.com, Younger Americans’ Library Habits and Expectations*, by KATHRYN ZICKUHR, LEE RAINIE AND KRISTEN PURCELL):

- 80% of Americans under age 30 say it is “very important” for libraries to have librarians to help people find information they need
- 76% say it is “very important” for libraries to offer research resources such as free databases
- 75% say free access to computers and the internet is “very important” for libraries to have
- 75% say it is “very important” for libraries to offer books for people to borrow
- 72% say quiet study spaces are “very important”
- 72% say programs and classes for children and teens are “very important” for libraries to have
- 71% say it is “very important” for libraries to offer job or career resources

These metrics show that the teens still need and want librarians, books, and technology in the same building. Today’s library isn’t a library without this triad. A question that always remains what do we do with a new comer and the repeat patron? How do we hook them and keep them around?

### **III. Practices to be Considered**

There are many ways to build an environment in libraries for that attracts teens using gaming and keep them coming back. First, a library should have experts. These people provide valid reference to young people. Having a gamer or an interested party makes the sharing of ideas much smoother. Second, up to date technology. Old technology, although nostalgic, doesn’t entice the forward-thinking Millennials and Gen Z’ers. That doesn’t mean there isn’t room for classic games. Jaakko Suominen states in the *FibreCulture Journal* that “The aesthetics of retro gaming can also act as an inside joke or a source of inspiration”. Learning from the past can have invaluable lessons. Third, a sense of inclusion and ownership.

#### **III.A Inside the Library**

##### **III.A.1 Following trends (Librarians)**

New games and genres are being released daily and on different platforms. Each new game is calling for gamers to use new buzzwords, control mechanics, information processing strategies, and peripherals. To stay on top of these trends requires a considerable amount of time and resources. The internet provides a host of outlets like IGN.com, PCgamer, and NeoSeeker. There are also publications that are and can be circulated like *Game Informer*, *Nintendo Force*, and *Electronic Gamer*. For teens in particular, their source of up-to-date information includes social media like Twitter and Instagram, gaming streams, and YouTube. YouTube is also a perfect way to subscribe to gaming trends. Channels like “Giant Bomb”, an American video game website and wiki that includes personality driven gaming videos, commentary, news and reviews, created by former GameSpot editors Jeff Gerstmann and Ryan Davis, on YouTube offer some great content. - (Giant Bomb Wikipedia page)

Librarians who oversee these technologies should be able to link the patron to the video games and to these resources. Video games have a long history and it is dense. Librarians are masters of research and materials, a natural handler for this job. They should be knowledgeable about the past

and present but also willing to follow the growing trends. They must be able to speak the language of the average gamer with all his/her acronyms and genre specific jargon.

There should be more opportunities for youth librarians to specialize in gaming resources and technology so that there are more people in the field thinking about the various ways gaming can be utilized to get teens in libraries and retain them as patrons. A big problem in public librarianship is the disappearance of subject specialization and thus less attention to specific areas of interests for patrons. (Meyer, 2016)

### III.A.2 Governance

Teen librarians are not new to the idea of teen governing bodies, having advisory boards and teen councils part of their makeup. In a library setting, teen gaming council serves as a good of kids that promotes agendas for and by the library gaming community while elevating the use of the library and its resources. Teens can appeal to this as they see clubs, student government, and leadership councils in most if not all of their schools. With the idea of inclusion in mind, teen patrons can feel a part of the library and its change making mechanism. The gaming council can request games and systems to be bought. They can create and challenge rules representing the larger group. They can be peer leaders acting as partners of the library to promote initiatives and recruit more patrons. They can sponsor activities and advocate for resources. Governance also promotes a sense of structure which Teens look for and need. Hobson, N. (2017) generation-z-vs-millennials

### III.A.3 Referencing the Rest of Collection (books)

A library should be an institution that promotes literacy first and foremost. To all who walk through the library, books are still the number one image that comes to mind. There are books like *Ready player One* by Ernest Cline, *Scott Pilgrim Series* by Bryan Lee O'Malley, or *The Leveller* by Julia Durango that give credibility to the avid or pedestrian video gamer. Books are still the apex of what makes the library a library, it would be sad not to find a way to tie into them.

### III.A.4 Create Gaming-specific Programming and Spaces

Gamers enjoy the end product but there is so much that goes into a game. There are many jobs and disciplines that can be introduced to teens when branching off of what they currently know. Creating video game specific coding classes or field trips can increase the likelihood of a teen checking out a programming book or using a computer to animate. Bringing in professionals from the industry will create meaningful connections to what they know, and where ever their inquisitive mind takes them.

Encouraging healthy competition will certainly promote the use of the space. This generation believes in working for their worth through video game leader-boards and bragging rights add to the fun. This can be done through the library posting the progress and results of tournaments, accolades and prizes when gamers reach a milestone, or just displaying high scores.

Kathryn Zickuhr, Lee Raine, Kristen Purcell say, "Having a separate children's area or young adult's area will cater solely to those groups and make them feel that the library is theirs. They do not have to deal with adults watching them or monitoring what book they pick or what they choose to do—it's all about them and what they want with no judgment. Children and teens love having their own space so why not give them that at the library?" If you build it, they will come.

### III.A.5 Budgets

Money is something all public institutions struggle with. Investing can be a prudent action. It can also yield great rewards. Setting aside money for more training would allow librarians to be on top of trends and new technology. Along with training, librarians need to be able to purchase new gaming technology to retain information and practices they were just trained on. Money would also fund programming and give incentive to the teen governing body to be and stay active. Allocating a portion of a budget theoretically guarantees that there is focus on gaming and the programming surrounding it.

### III.A.6 Using Library Cards

Library Cards are the gateway to library resources that add a level of accountability to each teen that comes into the space. The use of the technology and its peripherals should follow the check in and check out method. This behavior may cause teens to view their library card on par with their student ID, bus pass, or driver's license. There are arguments against circulating video games and gaming equipment because of the supposed high level of theft. This is a risk for all, in fact any popular, library materials. One way to prevent the loss of gaming equipment is to limit gaming use to in-house programming or gaming room.

## **III.B Outside the Library**

### III.B.1 Partnerships

Partnerships are paramount in any endeavor. A library can choose a corporate path; Having partnerships with tech companies for instance could allow for better resources such as hardware or expertise. These kinds of partnerships promote visibility where there may not be any and then it is a domino effect. Partnerships in this realm can be symbiotic; the library can provide a vehicle for prototype testing, a pool of willing interns, and a starting point of grassroots marketing.

As trusted centers of the community, libraries are in a unique position to attract potential partners, and to provide resources and benefits to organizations with common goals. (Knapp, M. Libraries Building Strong Community Partnerships)

### III.B.2 Promoting Collaboration

We live in a collaboration age. Videogames have done well to incorporate the trend and technology of online multiplayer using gamertags and handle to identify players across the globe. Teens are very social and use multiplayer as a way of connecting to various people around the world. This type of gaming can promote different types of collaboration.

One way of collaborating is creating library or branch-based gaming teams. Having teams create comradery, and also promotes a sense of belonging to an establishment. Teens, under a banner, can compete against other library teams in leagues for reward or just in recreation. They can compare high scores as well.

Another is adding cultural awareness. How someone in Korea may play a game and employ strategies that may be innovative to teens in the United States. Even with a language barrier, gamers still are able to appreciate other cultures over the gaming medium.

#### IV. Conclusion

Targeting teens isn't the only avenue to gain and retain library patrons, but it can be a significant one. We can build spaces and buy all the technology, but we should learn to appeal to the young patron. Every generation has their traits, wants, and needs. Tapping into today's teen and offering programming in an environment they can thrive in will pay dividends. They will not only tell their friends and family about their experiences causing collateral patronage but will also teach their children and the younger generations about the importance of the library.

In conclusion, if libraries allocate more resources into gaming, which includes but is not limited to; training for current staff members, hiring specialized "Video game" librarians, creating specific budgets to stay with and ahead of the technological curve, more and better equipped spaces for these teens and a genuine push to retain them as patrons. These users of public libraries will thrive as future advocates and trustees of these historic institutions.

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